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3 Hume and the Mechanics of Mind: Impressions, Ideas, and Association

By the time Hume started to work on his *Treatise*, the notion of an idea as the primary, most general sort of mental item dominated European philosophy. Although Descartes noted that, strictly speaking, only those “thoughts that are as it were images of things” were appropriately described as ideas, in practice he used “the word ‘idea’ to refer to whatever is immediately perceived by the mind.”¹ Not only do we have ideas of trees and the sun, but we also have ideas of our own activities of thinking and willing. Locke characterizes ‘idea’ as “being that Term, which, I think, serves best to stand for whatsoever is the Object of the Understanding when a Man thinks.” Locke also thinks that we not only have ideas that derive from things or objects in the world (ideas of sensation), but also of the activities and operations of our own minds (ideas of reflection). Ideas of sensation are acquired through the operation of external objects on our sense organs, while ideas of reflection come from introspection, from thinking about what happens within our own minds. He also thinks that these ideas of reflection are of two basic sorts of mental activity, perception and willing, that correspond to two faculties of mind: the understanding (or the power of thinking) and the will (or the power of volition).²

Hume introduced important innovations concerning the theory of ideas. The two most important are the distinction between impressions and ideas, and the use he made of the principles of association in explaining mental phenomena. Hume divided the perceptions of the mind into two classes. The members of one class, impressions, he held to have a greater degree of force and vivacity than the members of the other class, ideas. He also supposed that ideas are causally dependent copies of impressions. And, unlike Locke and others, Hume makes positive use of the principle of association, both of the association of

ideas, and, in a more limited way, of the association of impressions. Such associations are central to his explanations of causal reasoning, belief, the indirect passions (pride and humility, love and hatred), and sympathy. These views about impressions and ideas and the principles of association form the core of Hume's science of human nature. Relying on them, he attempts a rigorously empirical investigation of human nature. The resulting system is a remarkable but complex achievement.

I. IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

Hume begins Book 1 of the *Treatise*, "Of the Understanding," by saying: "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, SBN 1). In his later *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (hereafter *Enquiry*) he says much the same thing, but adds an example: "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 the sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination" (EHU 2.1, SBN 17). In neither work does he make an attempt to explain what he means by the phrase, "perceptions of the mind," but it would have been obvious to any eighteenth-century reader that he is using that expression much as Descartes and Locke had used the term "idea": for anything that mind is aware of or experiences. As he put it later in the *Treatise*: "To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive" (T 1.2.6.7, SBN 67).

Hume's initial step in the *Treatise* is to show that perceptions of the mind may be divided into "two distinct kinds," impressions and ideas. These two kinds commonly differ, he says, "in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind." Among our impressions, those perceptions with the most "force and vivacity," are sensations (including those of pain and pleasure) and the passions and emotions. Ideas are described as "the faint images" of impressions that are found "in

thinking and reasoning.” The distinction between ideas and impressions is further characterized as “the difference betwixt feeling and thinking.” Perceptions also differ in being either simple or complex. Simple perceptions, he says, “are such as admit of no distinction nor separation,” a single colour or taste, for example. Complex perceptions, in contrast, are those that “may be distinguish’d into parts,” for example, the several qualities (colour, taste, smell, etc.) “united together” in the perception of an apple (T 1.1.1.1-2, SBN 1-2; cf. EHU 2.3, SBN 18).

Impressions and ideas of sensation

Hume says that there are two kinds of impressions, “those of SENSATION and those of REFLECTION.” Although he has much to say about the causal origin of impressions of reflection, he says that impressions of sensation arise “in the soul originally, from unknown causes.”³ He says almost nothing about the causes of sense impressions and has, strictly speaking, no theory of perception. How we come to have impressions of sensation is a problem that he leaves to “anatomists and natural philosophers” (T 1.1.2.1, SBN 7; cf. T 2.1.1.2, SBN 275-6). His concern in Book 1 of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* is limited principally to the ideas that are derived from such impressions.

While Hume initially divides impressions into sensations, passions and emotions, ideas are characterized only as the images of impressions, and as the materials of thinking and reasoning. It is important to remember that Hume’s initial discussions in *Treatise* 1.1.1.1 and in *Enquiry* 2.1 are provisional, intended, by the use of examples, to introduce the reader to the distinction he has in mind. Once roughed out, this distinction is made “with the more accuracy” as Hume proceeds with “a more accurate survey.” Thus, while the official distinction between impressions and ideas is made in terms of force and liveliness or vivacity, we get an initial grip on it only as Hume gives us examples of impressions (of

sensations, passions and emotions), and then tells us more about ideas, the faint images of impressions. One might think that the characterization of ideas as faint images of impressions pre-judges Hume's important Copy Principle. Hume took great pains to argue for this principle—that all simple ideas are derived from simple impressions—on empirical grounds. He then says that this is “the first principle I establish in the science of human nature” (T 1.1.1.3-4, 12; SBN 2-3, 7). His efforts to establish it are meant to be a paradigm of empirical rigour. But if both the truth of this principle and Hume's method of establishing it are suspect because of an apparent pre-judgment of the issue, then his new science is off to a shaky start.⁴ The Copy Principle is not merely the first and one of the most important results of Hume's science and its method. In addition, because impressions effectively constitute or delineate our experience, the claim that all simple ideas derive from simple impressions gives substantial content to Hume's methodological determination to stay within the bounds of experience.

As long as one remembers that Hume's initial discussion is deliberately loose and inexact, this issue can be resolved in Hume's favour. It is true that the term “image” suggests a relationship of dependence: an image is dependent on that of which it is an image. But all Hume needs is the weaker concept, resemblance, of which he makes explicit use in the next few pages. The official distinction between impressions and ideas is in terms of force and vivacity. The reference to “sensations, passions and emotions” on the one hand, and “faint images of these,” on the other, is no part of the official theory, *at this stage*. These examples are introduced early on in order to help us grasp the distinction that Hume goes on to make officially, as it were, in other terms. If in the course of giving these examples to help us to understand the content he intends to give the terms “impressions” and “ideas,” he uses a stronger term than he should, no harm is done. No harm, that is, so long as, in the course of establishing the precedence of impressions over ideas, the real work is done by the notion of resemblance, not by that of image.

Thus when Hume goes on to consider “with the more accuracy” how it is that impressions and ideas interact among themselves and with each other, he shifts from talk of images to that of resemblance: “The first circumstance, that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity.” He then mentions that one kind of perception seems to be a reflection of the other, but he does not say which kind is the original and which the reflection. He first establishes the correspondence between simple ideas and impressions: “every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea.” Hume “affirms” this rule on the basis of observation, and further supports it by issuing a challenge to anyone who doubts the rule: find a counter-example. He then turns to a central task in his science of human nature, that of tracing the connections, especially the causal connections, between impressions and ideas. “The *full* examination of this question,” he says, “is the subject of the present treatise” (T 1.1.1.3, 5, 7, SBN 2-4).⁵

At this early stage Hume limits himself to a precise enunciation of the Copy Principle: “we shall here content ourselves with establishing one 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 represent.*” He establishes this principle in two stages. He first reassures himself “by a new review... that every simple impression is attended with a correspondent idea, and every simple idea with a correspondent impression.” In a foreshadowing of his analysis of our idea of causation, he describes this relationship as a “constant conjunction.” And he argues that this constant conjunction is evidence of a causal connection between impressions and ideas: “Such a constant conjunction, in such an infinite number of instances, can never arise from chance; but clearly proves a dependence of the impressions on the ideas, or of the ideas on the impressions” (T 1.1.1.7-8, SBN 4-5).

The question of dependence, Hume argues, can be decided by determining which of a pair of resembling impressions and ideas appears first. He finds “by constant experience” that simple impressions are always experienced before their corresponding ideas. He also finds that our practice confirms this: when we want to introduce a person to the idea of orange, we convey to her the impression “but proceed not so absurdly, as to endeavour to produce the impressions by exciting the ideas.” He summarizes his argument by saying that the “constant conjunction of our resembling perceptions, is a convincing proof, that the one are the causes of the other; and this priority of the impressions is an equal proof, that our impressions are the causes of our ideas, not our ideas of our impressions.” He also provides a second causal argument, pointing out that whenever

by any accident the faculties, which give rise to any impressions, are obstructed in their operations, as when one is born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas; so that there never appear in the mind the least traces of either of them. Nor is this only true, where the organs of sensation are entirely destroy’d, but likewise where they have never been put in action to produce a particular impression. We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pine-apple, without having actually tasted it. (T 1.1.1.8-9, SBN 5)⁶

This first principle of the science of human nature is important for many reasons. Perhaps most important is Hume’s determination to use the principle as a way of testing the content of ideas and thus limiting metaphysical speculation. If ideas of sensation are copies of impressions, then the content of such an idea cannot outstrip the content of the impression from which it is derived. In the *Enquiry* this test is explicitly put forward as a check on the meaning of philosophical terms:

When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. (EHU 2.9, SBN 22; cf. A 7, SBN 646-7)⁷

In the *Treatise*, Hume first uses this check to test the notion of substance in 1.1.6, but the most famous deployment occurs in his discussion of the idea of necessary connection.

Impressions and Ideas of Reflection

In *Treatise* 1.1.2, Hume distinguishes between impressions of sensation and impressions of reflection. Impressions of reflection are “deriv’d in a great measure from our ideas.” On this account, we first experience impressions of sensation, including “heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain.” Copies of these impressions are retained as ideas, and when we recall such an idea of pleasure or pain it “produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear.” These Hume calls “impressions of reflection” because they are derived from a reflection on previous experience. Among impressions of reflection he initially includes the “passions, desires, and emotions,” but this division is apparently provisional, for in Book 2 he describes desire and aversion as direct passions, not as impressions of reflection.⁸ Moreover, Hume often uses “emotion” to refer, not to an impression of reflection, but to the feeling such an impression has.⁹ He also sometimes uses “sensation” in the same way, as when he says of calm passions that they “produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by [any] immediate feeling or sensation”(T 1.1.2.1, 2.3.3.8; SBN 7-8, 417).

At *Treatise* 2.1.1, Hume replaces the distinction between impressions of sensation and reflection with a more accurate distinction between original and secondary impressions. As a term of classification, “impressions of sensation” is either too narrow or too broad. If “sensation” means “comes from the senses,” then it is not clear that “impressions of sensation” include pleasures and pains. But if “sensation” just means “feeling,” then there is no clear difference between impressions of sensation and those of reflection. Furthermore, the category “impressions of reflection” is misleading. Not all passions,

emotions and desires are caused by reflection, by, that is, the consideration of our ideas. Some are caused immediately by other impressions. Original impressions, he says, “are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul.” They include “all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures.”¹⁰ When Hume says that these original impressions make their appearance in the soul “without any introduction,” he does not mean “without cause,” but rather “without any preceding thought or perception.”¹¹ Every impression has a causal history, but the causal history of original impressions does not, typically, involve other perceptions of the mind. Moreover, Hume here reiterates the policy established at the beginning of Book 1. He will not look for the “natural and physical causes” of original impressions. To do so, he says again, would lead him away from his “subject, into the sciences of anatomy and natural philosophy” (T 2.1.1.1-2, SBN 275-6).

For the remainder of the *Treatise*, Hume treats the passions as secondary impressions. Secondary impressions are caused by original impressions or by an idea derived from an original impression. The original impressions are usually pleasures or pains.¹² Consider, for example, the bodily pain associated with an attack of gout. This “produces a long train of passions, such as grief, hope, fear.” These passions may also be produced, not by any present pain from this condition, but by remembering the pain it caused in the past or anticipating its future pain. As Hume says, “Bodily pains and pleasures are the sources of many passions, both when felt and [when] consider’d by the mind” (T 2.1.1.2, SBN 276).

Hume also distinguishes between direct and indirect passions. Among the former he lists desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, security, and, interestingly, volition (T 2.1.2.4, SBN 277). These direct passions arise immediately from an impression or idea of pain or pleasure, or what Hume often calls “good or evil.” Furthermore, the “mind by an *original* instinct tends to unite itself with the good, and to avoid the evil, tho’ they be conceiv’d merely in idea, and be consider’d as to exist in any future

period of time.” By “original instinct,” Hume means a basic feature of human nature, a feature that explains behaviour, but that cannot itself be explained. These fundamental connections between pleasure and desire or pain and aversion help explain human motivation. As Hume puts it, “the WILL exerts itself, when either the good or the absence of the evil may be attain’d by any action of the mind or body” (T 2.3.9.1-2, 7; SBN 438-9).¹³

In addition to those direct passions that arise from the perception of pleasure and pain, there are also those that “arise from a natural impulse or instinct, which is perfectly unaccountable.” These instinctively based passions include “the desire of punishment to our enemies, and of happiness to our friends; hunger, lust, and a few other bodily appetites.” Unlike the other direct passions, these passions are not caused by pleasure or pain or the prospect thereof. On the contrary, these passions “produce” pleasure or pain, as, for example, when hunger leads us to eat, an act which gives pleasure. Given the central role that these two kinds of direct passions play in human motivation, one would expect Hume to have a lot to say about them. But, apart from the extensive discussion of hope and fear in *Treatise* 2.3.9, he tells us that none “of the direct affections seem to merit our particular attention” (T 2.3.9.8-9, SBN 439). He is much more interested in what he calls the indirect passions, discussion of which occupies roughly two-thirds of Book 2 of the *Treatise*.

Hume has an extraordinarily rich and interesting story to tell about the indirect passions, their nature and their causal origins. In some ways his account of these is the most technically sophisticated part of his science of human nature. The basic indirect passions are pride and humility, love and hatred. Others that derive from these four are ambition, vanity, envy, pity, malice, generosity and “their dependants” (T 2.1.1.4, SBN 276-7).

Several features of the indirect passions stand out.

1) The indirect passions, like all passions, are “simple and uniform impressions.” As a result,

“‘tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them, or indeed of any of the passions” (T 2.1.2.1, SBN 277).

2) The feeling of the passions of love and pride is pleasant, while hatred and humility feel painful. The causes of love and pride produce a pleasure distinct from those passions themselves, while the causes of hatred and humility produce a pain distinct from those passions themselves.

3) The indirect passions have both causes and objects, which must be distinguished. The object of pride and humility is always the self. “Here the view always fixes when we are actuated by either of these passions.” The object of love and hatred is always another person. “Our love and hatred are always directed to some sensible being external to us” (T 2.1.2.2, 2.2.1.2; SBN 277, 329).

4) The indirect passions, like all passions, do not purport to represent anything. I return to this issue in Part III below.

Because this account of the indirect passions relies heavily on a double relation of impressions and ideas, further discussion of it will be deferred until we have considered Hume’s theory of relations.

II. RELATIONS

In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* Hume introduces three principles of association: resemblance, contiguity and cause and effect. These are “universal principles, which render [the imagination], in some measure, uniform with itself in all times and places” (T 1.1.4.1, SBN 10). In the *Enquiry*, he somewhat more cautiously says that it “is evident, that there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind, and that, in their appearance to the memory or imagination, they introduce each other with a certain degree of method and regularity” (EHU 3.1, SBN 23). In the *Treatise*, these three principles of association are called *natural* relations, and are given this name because in each such relation one idea involuntarily or “naturally introduces” another. Natural relations contrast with a second

set of relations, the *philosophical* relations, or those in which one idea is voluntarily compared with another. As Hume sums up his view:

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 . . . 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 (T 1.1.5.1, SBN 13).

These two kinds of relation require our attention.

Philosophical Relations

Hume draws attention to philosophical relations in *Treatise* 1.1.5 and again in 1.3.1. The earlier discussion is essentially a list, with a brief description of each of the seven philosophical relations. In the later discussion, he divides these relations into two classes. The first class includes *resemblance*, *contrariety*, *degrees in quality*, and *proportions in quantity or number*. Hume says of these four relations that “they depend entirely on the ideas, which we compare together” and illustrates his view by saying: “‘Tis from the idea of a triangle, that we discover the relation of equality, which its three angles bear to two right ones; and this relation is invariable, as long as our idea remains the same” (T 1.3.1.1, SBN 69). He is saying, in other words, that as long as we take the idea of a triangle to be that of an enclosed plane figure made up of three straight lines, we will find that the sum of the internal angles of this figure will be exactly equivalent to the sum of two right angles. This is a demonstrative judgment, the conclusion, that is, of a piece of demonstrative reasoning the contrary of which cannot be conceived, and which results in *knowledge*.

It is tempting to think of this first class of relations as being broadly logical in character or

instantiating metaphysical necessity. But this cannot be right. Such relations include *degrees in quality*, of which Hume gives this example: “And tho’ it be impossible to judge exactly of the degrees of any quality, such as colour, taste, heat, cold, when the difference betwixt them is very small; yet ‘tis easy to decide, that any of them is superior or inferior to another, when their difference is considerable” (T 1.3.1.2, SBN 70). If I have an idea of something being pretty hot, and another idea of something being pretty cold, then *as long as those ideas remain the same*, the relation between the two ideas will always be the same. Note that this recognition that one thing is noticeably hotter than another thing is an example of a relation known, in Hume’s terms, with “knowledge and certainty.”

Relations of the second class, those involving *time and place, identity, and causation*, are different. These relations “may be chang’d without any change in the ideas.” Hume says, for example, that “the relations of *contiguity* and *distance* betwixt two objects may be chang’d merely by an alteration of their place, without any change on the objects themselves or on their ideas; and the place depends on a hundred different accidents, which cannot be foreseen by the mind” (T 1.3.1.1, SBN 69). Consider this example of two objects subject to such changes. Suppose I have two cars, a Jaguar and a BMW. These could be side-by-side in my driveway. The same cars could equally well be separated by a continent, the Jaguar in New York and the BMW in LA. Whatever their location, my ideas of these cars remain exactly the same, but the spatial relationship between them may have changed. Or, suppose I think that the golf ball I just hit down the fairway is the same one that I used when I made a hole-in-one last week. But then I remember that I put the hole-in-one ball away as a souvenir, and so it and the one just struck cannot be identical. The *ideas* of these golf-balls are indistinguishable –the ideas are effectively the same –but the relationship between them is not one of identity. Judgments regarding this second set of relations are not, according to Hume, demonstrative and certain, but only probable.¹⁴

Hume’s distinction between these two classes of philosophical relations is replaced in the

Enquiry with the more famous distinction between *relations of ideas* and *matters of fact*. The former includes “every affirmation, which is either intuitively or demonstratively certain” and which is “discoverable by the mere operation of thought, without dependence on what is anywhere existent in the universe.” Any proposition that is intuitively or demonstratively true is such that its denial “would imply a contradiction, and could never be distinctly conceived by the mind” (EHU 4.1-2, SBN 25-6). This gives Hume a criterion: any proposition the falsehood of which we can conceive without contradiction is neither intuitively nor demonstratively certain. It must therefore fall into the other class, matter of fact.¹⁵

In both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry* Hume also distinguishes between *intuition* and *demonstration*, between those relations that we can perceive immediately, and those relations that we perceive as the result of a reasoning process. Three relations, *resemblance*, *contrariety* and *degrees in quality* are, Hume says, “discoverable at first sight, and fall more properly under the province of intuition than demonstration.” We intuit a relation when we can just see, without the aid of any other ideas, that two ideas stand in a certain relationship with each other. Think of the ideas of a hot coal and an ice cube. We understand, without further thought, that the qualities of temperature represented by those ideas are significantly different. Now consider a relation involving *proportions in quantity or number*. Hume illustrates his position by means of a geometrical example, the relationship of the internal angles of a triangle and two right angles. This is a relationship of equality, but most of us cannot intuit or see that this is true. We have to demonstrate this truth to ourselves, or proceed, as Hume puts it, “in a more *artificial* manner” (T 1.3.1.2-3, SBN 70). This process of demonstration is a matter of constructing a chain of ideas, the first of which is the idea of the internal angles of a triangle, and the last of which is the idea of two right angles. Each of the intermediate ideas must be seen to be intuitively connected to the ideas with which it is adjacent in the chain. We in effect see that two things equal to a third thing are equal to one another. In this case, the way to proceed is to discover an angle that we can

just see is equal to both the internal angles of a triangle and to two right angles.¹⁶

Hume also distinguishes between the immediate and the inferential in “matters of fact.” The relations of identity and of time and place are grasped, he says, as the result of “a mere passive admission of the impressions thro’ the organs of sensation.” Consequently, “we ought not to receive as reasoning any of the observations we may make” concerning them (T 1.3.2.2, SBN 73). In other words, we immediately sense that one impression or idea is or is not identical with another, or was or was not prior to another. It is only the relation of cause and effect that enables, and even forces us, to move from the experience of something presently observed to the idea of something not presently observed.¹⁷ But it is the natural relation of causation that has this all-important feature:

Thus tho’ causation be a *philosophical* relation, as implying contiguity, succession, and constant conjunction, yet ‘tis only so far as it is a *natural* relation, and produces an union among our ideas, that we are able to reason upon it, or draw any inference from it. (T 1.3.6.16, SBN 94)

Natural Relations, or Association

All ideas are derived from impressions, and ideas can stand in philosophical relations to each other.

But more importantly for Hume, ideas and impressions can stand in natural relations to each other.

The central role played by association is one of the most distinctive aspects of Hume’s science of human nature, as aspect of which he was proud, as the *Abstract* shows:

Thro’ this whole book, there are great pretensions to new discoveries in philosophy; but if any thing can entitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an *inventor*, ‘tis the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy ... there is a secret tie or union among particular ideas, which causes the mind to conjoin them more frequently together, and makes the one, upon its appearance, introduce the other ... ’Twill be easy to conceive of what vast consequence these principles must be in the science of human nature, if we consider, that so far as regards the mind, these are the only links that bind the parts of the universe together ... they are really *to us* the cement of the universe, and all operations of the mind must, in great measure, depend on them. (A 35, SBN 662)

We noted Hume’s careful empirical establishment of the Copy Principle (all simple ideas are

derived from simple impressions), and saw that this is an aspect of his determination not to go beyond experience and what can be derived from experience. His account of the association of ideas is similarly empirical but proceeds in a different fashion. Hume's proof of the Copy Principle depended on a survey that led to a generalization. In contrast, the principles of association are postulated to explain uniformities in phenomena. A complete defence of these principles cannot be given when they are first enunciated in *Treatise* 1.1.4. In fact, the adequacy of Hume's account of the principles of association can be judged only by the success or failure of the *Treatise* as a whole. Hume observes that it is common that "the same simple ideas ... fall regularly into complex ones." Such patterns would be impossible were "ideas entirely loose and unconnected." Thus there must be "some universal principles, which render [the imagination], in some measure, uniform with itself in all times and places." Consistently with having found that the imagination is free to join any two simple ideas it chooses, the principles of association link ideas with "a gentle force, which commonly prevails," rather than by "an inseparable connexion" (T 1.1.4.1, SBN 10).

Hume lists three "qualities, from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner convey'd from one idea to another." These are resemblance, contiguity in time and place, and cause and effect. He makes no attempt at this stage to show that there are no other principles of association. He simply claims that it is "plain" and "evident" that "these three qualities produce an association among ideas, and upon the appearance of one idea naturally introduce another" (T 1.1.4.2, SBN 11). In the first *Enquiry*, he does claim that "this enumeration is compleat" while admitting the difficulty of proving his claim: "All we can do, in such cases, is to run over several instances, and examine carefully the principle, which binds the different thoughts together to each other, never stopping till we render the principle as general as possible" (EHU 3.3, SBN 24). This is a typical feature of Hume's science of human nature. Regularities at one level are to be explained by over-arching

principles, but we cannot expect that those principles themselves can always be explained.¹⁸

The Uses of Association

Although Hume says in the *Abstract* that it is the use he makes of the principles of association of ideas that is innovative, two of his most important uses of association involve impressions. Hume specifically speaks of the association of impressions, noting “this remarkable difference, that ideas are associated by resemblance, contiguity, and causation; and impressions only by resemblance” (T 2.1.4.3, SBN 283).

This second sort of association is central in explaining the indirect passions. The other use of association involving impressions is perhaps the most important use of association in the *Treatise*. The central argument of *Treatise* 1.3 concerns probable or causal reasoning, and the production of beliefs in what is presently unobserved or unobservable on the basis of what is presently observed, of, that is, a present impression.¹⁹

Belief and Causal Reasoning

The act of believing, for Hume, is the act of assenting or judging. But Hume’s central case of belief is not the assent we might attach to any proposition, whether known or merely believed, but rather the belief we have in unobserved existents. Belief in these is contrasted with knowledge, knowledge of mathematical propositions, for example. The central issue of *Treatise* 1.3 is how, on the basis of past experience, we come to believe in the existence of objects or events that we are not currently experiencing. His negative account is that in coming to have such beliefs, we are not determined by reason.²⁰ His positive account involves both his theory of association and his account of belief. Past experience shows us that one sort of object or event, B, has always followed another contiguous object

or event, A. This sets up an association, so that whenever we have an impression of A, we are led to have an idea of B and, furthermore, to believe that B will again occur. But what is it to believe that B will occur, as opposed to merely thinking or conceiving B? Hume's answer is that we believe that B will occur – in the coming existence of B – when the force or vivacity of our idea of B approximates that which an impression of B would have. A belief in such a matter of fact is simply a more forceful or lively idea. What distinguishes beliefs from mere conceptions is the same thing that distinguishes ideas from impressions: force and vivacity, or liveliness.²¹

Association works in two ways in causal reasoning and the production of belief. The first explains why it is that on the appearance of one sort of impression the mind comes to have another sort of idea. Hume here appeals explicitly to the principles of association:

When the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin'd by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination. Had ideas no more union in the fancy than objects seem to have to the understanding, we cou'd never draw any inference from causes to effects, nor repose belief in any matter of fact. The inference, therefore, depends solely on the union of ideas. (T 1.3.6.12, SBN 92)

This explains why the mind makes the transition from a first impression or idea to another idea, but it does not explain why that idea is believed, and not merely conceived. For example, if I see a patch of scorched earth, I might then believe that this patch was recently burned, for fire and scorched earth have in my past experience been associated as, respectively, cause and effect. But so far, Hume has only accounted for the occurrence of the idea *fire* and not for my belief that there has been a fire. For an idea to be a belief, it must have a greater degree of force and vivacity; it must in this respect approximate to an impression.²² But what is the source of extra force and vivacity that constitute my belief that a fire

has scorched the earth? This force and vivacity come from the impression with which the idea is associated. Again, Hume is explicit:

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, SBN 98)

The three principles of association are features of human nature, and so is the fact that force and vivacity is transmitted from one associated perception of the mind to another. Both are crucial to Hume's account of causal reasoning and the production of belief.²³

Hume's account of those beliefs reached by causal or probable reasoning does not explain the assent we give to knowledge. Concerning propositions known by intuition or demonstration, Hume says that "the person, who assents, not only conceives the ideas according to the proposition, but is necessarily determin'd to conceive them in that particular manner." If one understands that A is equal to B, and that B is equal to C, one has no choice but to suppose that A is also equal to C. In other words, the assent that attaches to *knowledge* comes from our inability to conceive an item of knowledge to be false. In contrast, so far as probable or causal *belief* is concerned, "the imagination is free to conceive both sides of the question," and belief, as we have seen, depends of the force and vivacity of the idea associated with some present impression (1.3.7.3, SBN 95).

Double Relation

Hume's account of the indirect passions is summarized in Part I. The basic indirect passions are pride and humility, love and hatred. Although the cause of each occurrence of any of these passions varies (I can be proud of my new car, of my daughter's grades, and even of the quality of a local restaurant),

Hume thought it absurd to think that there was an original or fundamental feature of human nature that explains each such instance of pride. It is more in keeping with a science of human nature to think that each of these items can produce pride “by partaking of some general quality, that naturally operates on the mind” (T 2.1.3.5, SBN 281). The relevant qualities, it turns out, are those that produce a pleasure resembling but distinct from love and pride, or a pain resembling but distinct from hatred and humility. And these qualities “naturally operate” on the mind through association. Consider my pride in my new car. When I survey this car I see an expensive and colourful object capable of safely transporting me and my family. This survey causes me to feel pleasure. But the feeling of pride is also pleasant, and, by resemblance (the only principle of association that links impressions), the feeling of pleasure arising in such circumstances is associated to a distinct feeling, the passion of pride. Furthermore, as the car is mine, the survey of it, by the association of ideas, brings to mind the idea of my self, the idea of the person who is the natural object of my pride. In a second way, then, association facilitates the production of pride. Using Hume’s text to sum up:

That cause [some quality of my new car], which excites the passion [pride], is related to the object [of pride, my self], which nature has attributed to the passion; the sensation [pleasure], which the cause separately produces, is related to the sensation [another pleasure] of the passion: From this double relation of ideas and impressions, the passion is deriv’d. (T 2.1.5.5, SBN 286)

This double relation of impressions and ideas is another example of the importance of association in Hume’s philosophy. As he says: “Any thing, that gives a pleasant sensation, and is related to self, excites the passion of pride, which is also agreeable, and has self for its object.” It is the association of a pleasant sensation with pride, and the further association of the idea of what produces that pleasant sensation with the idea of self, that explain the occurrence of pride. We have seen that association is

crucial in explaining the formation of causal beliefs. Hume draws attention to the similarities between that account and his account of the indirect passions. He even uses the same expression “a kind of attraction,” that he used when he first discussed association at *Treatise* 1.1.4. In the formation of causal beliefs, he says,

the present impression gives a vivacity to the fancy, and the relation [of association] conveys this vivacity, by an easy transition, to the related idea ... There is evidently a great analogy betwixt that hypothesis, and our present one of an impression and idea, that transfuse themselves into another impression and idea by means of their double relation: Which analogy must be allow'd to be no despicable proof of both hypotheses. (T 2.1.5.8, 10-11, SBN 288-90)

Sympathy

Another important concept introduced in Book 2 is that of sympathy. It too is handled with technical facility, and explained in terms of Hume's account of impressions, ideas, and association. In the *Treatise*, at least, “sympathy” has a special meaning for Hume. We sympathize with others when we “receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own.” Hume explains this process in two stages. We are first made aware of the sentiment or opinion of another “only by its effects, and by those external signs in the countenance and conversation, which convey an idea of it.” But there is more to sympathy than having an idea of another's feeling. By sympathy, the relevant idea is “converted into an impression, and acquires such a degree of force and vivacity, as to become the very passion itself, and produce an equal emotion, as any original affection.” Hume has to explain both the source of our idea of another's feeling and how this idea comes to have the extra force and vivacity that transforms it from an idea of a feeling into the very feeling it represents. His explanation is simple: a lively idea, indeed an impression, of our self is always present to us,²⁴ and thus:

“Whatever object ... is related to ourselves must be conceiv’d with a like vivacity of conception, according to the foregoing principles,” namely, the principles of association. The greater the resemblance or contiguity to us of the person feeling the original sentiment, the more likely our idea of that feeling is to be converted into the feeling itself: “The stronger the relation is betwixt ourselves and any object, the more easily does the imagination make the transition, and convey to the related idea the vivacity of conception, with which we always form the idea of our own person” (T 2.1.11.2-5, SBN 316-18).

Resemblance functions here in two ways. There is “the general resemblance of our natures,” so that we have some tendency to sympathize with any other human being. Furthermore, where “there is any peculiar similarity in our manners, or character, or country, or language, it facilitates the sympathy.” The greater the resemblance between ourselves and others, the more likely we are to sympathize with them. Contiguity and causation also play a role: “The sentiments of others have little influence, when far remov’d from us, and require the relation of contiguity, to make them communicate themselves entirely. The relations of blood, being a species of causation, may sometimes contribute to the same effect” (T 2.1.11.5-6, SBN 318).²⁵

As in his account of belief, this explanation of how an idea can be turned into an impression works only because of Hume’s doctrine of impressions and ideas. If an idea differs from its correspondent impression only in terms of force and vivacity, then we can explain the operation of sympathy simply by accounting for the source of the additional force and vivacity that accounts for the conversion of a relevant idea into a resembling impression or passion. In general terms, Hume’s account of sympathy runs parallel to his account of belief. As he says: “Let us compare all these circumstances, and we shall find, that sympathy is exactly correspondent to the operations of our understanding; and

even contains something more surprizing and extraordinary” (T 2.1.11.8, SBN 320). The association of ideas plays a crucial role in each, and in each case an idea is enlivened by the addition of extra force and vivacity. In the case of belief, the source of the extra force and vivacity is an associated impression. In the case of sympathy the source is an ever-present impression of the self, and because of the strength of this idea, sympathy is even more extraordinary than belief, for, while belief enlivens an idea so that it approximates to an impression, sympathy actually turns an idea into an impression.²⁶ Sympathy can enliven an idea so that it becomes an actual passion. But sympathy can also enliven other kinds of ideas. It can, for example, enliven beliefs so that they too are transferred from individual to individual. Because of sympathy, Hume says, “men of the greatest judgment and understanding . . . find it very difficult to follow their own reason or inclination, in opposition to that of their friends and daily companions” (T 2.1.11.2, SBN 316).²⁷

III REPRESENTATION, INTENTIONALITY, AND CORRECTION

Sensation and Representation

Hume’s first principle in the science of human nature is that all simple ideas are derived from simple impressions, “*which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*” (T 1.1.1.7, SBN 4). Ideas represent impressions, and they do so in virtue of resembling them, and being caused by them.²⁸ Because ideas are causally dependent on impressions and differ from them only in the degree of their force and vivacity, they can in another important respect resemble impressions: the content of the two kinds of perception can be exactly identical. But this leads us to a question of the greatest importance. If ideas represent impressions because of causal dependence and resemblance, how and what do impressions represent? We want our idea of the telephone in the next room, for example, to be an idea of an actual, physical object in the next room, and not merely the idea of an impression, which after all is

just another perception of the mind. But it looks as if this can be so only if the impression we had of a telephone when we were in the next room represented an actual, physical telephone.

The question, what do impressions represent, turns out to be extremely difficult to answer. In order to address it, we must first remember to distinguish between impressions of sensation and impressions of reflection or secondary impressions. The question about what and how impressions represent does not arise for impressions of reflection. Hume is clear about this: a passion, the paradigm impression of reflection, is, he says, “an original existence, or, if you will, modification of existence, and contains not any representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification” (T 2.3.3.5, SBN 415).²⁹ So the issue concerning the representative nature of impressions is limited to impressions of sensation.³⁰ But as we saw above in Part I, Hume supposes that the sources or causes of impressions of sensation are beyond our reach. Such impressions, he says, arise “in the soul originally, from unknown causes.” This is enough to rule out any investigation of the causes of such impressions, and is in addition consistent with his limitation of enquiry to experience. If experience itself is constituted by impressions, then it is clear that the cause of impressions cannot itself be a subject of empirical inquiry.³¹ We cannot, for example, sensibly ask whether our impression of a tree is caused by and represents a tree. We can inquire into the causes of our *beliefs* about trees, as Hume does with great subtlety in 1.4.2 (*Of scepticism with regard to the senses*), but that is a different matter. We can also examine the character of our sensations and how they are interrelated to each other and to other perceptions of the mind, but beyond that we cannot go. “We may,” he says, “draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions,” but as to “those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and ‘twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc’d by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv’d from the author of our being” (T 1.3.5.2, SBN 84).³²

Consequently, one answer to the question, What do impressions of sensation represent?, is: As far as we know, nothing! Impressions of sensation may no more represent than do impressions of reflection.³³ Ideas represent impressions, because they are caused by and resemble impressions. But Hume says more than once that we cannot know the causes of impressions of sensation. This may be why he calls them “original impressions.”³⁴

And if we cannot know the causes of our sense impressions, we can never be in a position to know whether these impressions resemble their causes. On the other hand, we certainly talk as if our sense impressions represent objects in the world and distinct from our minds, and Hume owes us an account of this. This he provides in 1.4.2. Hume is well aware that what he calls “the philosophical system” does “suppose external objects to resemble internal perceptions.” But he claims to have already shown, in arguments made earlier in the section, “that the relation of cause and effect can never afford us any just conclusion from the existence or qualities of our perceptions to the existence of external continu’d objects.” He goes on to add “that even tho’ they cou’d afford such a conclusion, we shou’d never have any reason to infer, that our objects resemble our perceptions” (1.4.2.54, SBN 216).³⁵

The fact that Hume does not discuss in detail what and whether impressions of sensation represent until late in Book 1 explains another fact. It is pretty clear that Hume takes sense impressions to be not just content but also judgments, judgments about the existence of things. The nature of those judgments is not clarified until *Of scepticism with regard to the senses*, but even in the early stages of the *Treatise* Hume seems committed to something like the following view: when we have an impression of an apple, we do not simply have an apple-like experience; we also judge an apple to exist. Of course Hume is reluctant at this stage to say much about this, because of the problematic nature of our beliefs in the world we experience. Nonetheless, he does talk about “the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses” and goes on to say that this belief is

nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present... To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, 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. (T 1.3.5.7, SBN 86)

Sense impressions are not mere sense data. To have an impression is to make a judgment. If it were not so, Hume could not explain the nature of beliefs reached by causal reasoning by showing that these approximate to impressions.

Intentionality and the Passions

Hume's discussion of the origins of the indirect passions as the result of a double relation of ideas and impressions shows great technical sophistication, and further illustrates his commitment to the formation of a science of human nature.³⁶ Attention to this aspect of Hume's account can help soften, perhaps disarm, some fairly obvious criticisms of his account of the passions, especially with respect to intentionality.³⁷ We noted that Hume thinks of all the passions as "simple and uniform impressions, [so that] 'tis impossible we can ever, by a multitude of words, give a just definition of them" (T 2.1.2.1, SBN 277). When taken out of context, this may seem implausible. How could something as rich and complex as love be a simple impression of reflection? Simple impressions may have no logical relations, but the love Desdemona bears for Othello necessarily involves Othello. Hume captures this feature when he says that the object of love is another person. It is true that, on Hume's account, the relation between Desdemona's love (an impression) and the idea of Othello is causal and not logical.³⁸ But the indirect passions are determined to have their objects, "not only by a natural, but also by an original property" of the human soul. "Now these qualities, which we must consider as original, are such as are most inseparable from the soul, and can be resolv'd into no other: And such is the quality which determines the object of [the indirect passions]" (T 2.1.3.2-3, SBN 280).³⁹ Love, as a basic fact of human nature, just

does take another person as its object. And Desdemona's love for Othello would not be the love it is if it took some other person, for example, Cassio, as its object. Although strictly speaking a passion is a simple impression, incapable of definition, each passion is bound in a relational nexus of a double relation of impressions and ideas, and cannot be understood independently of that context.⁴⁰

Hume not only says that passions are simple impressions, he also says that they do not purport to represent anything. As we have seen, he insists that a passion contains no "representative quality, which renders it a copy of any other existence or modification" (T 2.3.3.5, SBN 415). This may look like an implausible denial of the intentionality of passions and desires.⁴¹ We should first note what Hume is concerned to deny in this passage. As we have seen, impressions of sensation are as much judgments as they are pure sensations. We normally think of this as meaning that an impression represents an external object, and that, if the representation is accurate, our judgment is true.⁴² What Hume is claiming about the passions is that they are differently structured. Having a passion is not akin to making a judgment. Passions or secondary impressions do not carry with them this representational character. As they do not purport to copy or represent anything, they cannot be true or false, reasonable or unreasonable.⁴³

To deny that passions are judgments is not to answer all questions about their intentionality. They may not express truths or falsehoods, but they are nonetheless directed. If Desdemona loves Othello, then there is an alternative sense in which Othello is represented by the passion. Othello is the object of Desdemona's love. The passion of love is a simple impression, so the idea of Othello cannot be part of that impression. But the idea of Othello is the object of that passion, and is brought to mind by it. When the passions are considered in their relational context, their alternative form of intentionality becomes apparent.

The direct passions are also intentional in this limited sense. Anger is typically directed towards

an individual, as is lust. But these are direct, not indirect passions, and we thus cannot appeal to the double relation of ideas and impressions to account for their intentionality. Nonetheless, direct passions often bring to mind ideas, just as the passion of pride, for example, bring to mind the idea of self. Hume says, “The sensations of lust and hunger always produce in us the idea of those peculiar objects, which are suitable to each appetite” (T 2.1.5.6, SBN 287). And he explicitly compares this with the production of the idea of self by pride. Similarly, desire and aversion arise in response to an impression or idea of pleasure and pain, and produce in turn ideas of various things that can produce the envisaged pleasure or help to avoid pain.⁴⁴ So Hume explains the intentionality of all passions, not just the indirect ones, in terms of the complex nexus of relations passions bear to various impressions and ideas. And of course, passions must stand in such relations, or they would be unable to interact with beliefs in the determination of the will and the production of behaviour. Beliefs about sources of pleasure and pain produce desires, which in turn produce ideas of what will satisfy those desires.

Correction

Hume notes that the passions have commonly been divided into the calm and violent. An example of the former is “the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects.” The latter seem to include such passions as “love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility.” But Hume thinks that this division is “far from being exact”; indeed it is “vulgar and specious.” The “raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height; while those other impressions, properly call’d *passions*, may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible” (T 2.1.1.3, SBN 276). The distinction between calm and violent occurs again later, not as a means of classifying impressions of reflection, but as a manner of describing the different ways that passions can be experienced. This is important for at least two reasons. First, reason “exerts itself without producing any sensible emotion.”

There are also “certain calm desires and tendencies, which, tho’ they be real passions, produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by the immediate feeling or sensation.” Since it is natural, but mistaken, “to imagine, that those actions of the mind are entirely the same, which produce not a different sensation,” it is common to mistake the influence of the calm passions on our behaviour for the influence of reason. Secondly, although both the calm and violent passions influence the will, and hence our behaviour, it is natural to think that the more violent the passion, the more effect it will have on us. But this is not so. Hume says that what “we call strength of mind, implies the prevalence of the calm passions above the violent” (T 2.3.3.8,10, SBN 417-18).⁴⁵

At first glance, it looks as if there is a disanalogy between, on the one hand, the assent we attach to our beliefs (that is to the force and vivacity or liveliness of ideas) and the subsequent effect of beliefs on our behaviour, and, on the other hand, a passion’s violence and the subsequent effect of that passion on our behaviour. A belief influences the will because it approximates to an impression: the effect 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” (T 1.3.10.3, SBN 119). So the assent we attach to beliefs, and its effect on behaviour, just is equivalent to an idea’s force and vivacity, and Hume is happy to speak of this force and vivacity as “a feeling or sentiment.”⁴⁶ If the effect of a passion on the will was exactly parallel to that of a belief, then the stronger in feeling the passion, the more it would influence behaviour. But this is just to say that a passion’s influence is directly proportional to its violence. But we have seen that Hume denies this conclusion.

This apparent disanalogy is easy to overstate. In both cases, there is an initial correlation between

the strength in feeling of the perception and its effect on the will. But, as we have seen, towards the end of his important discussion, *Of the influencing motives of the will*, Hume allows that this correlation can be corrected, at least with respect to the passions. It is not always the case that the more violent a passion is, the more it affects behaviour. There is a virtue, strength of mind, that comes with maturity and reflection. Although we are inclined to act on our most violent impulses, we learn not to. Hume frequently speaks of correcting our feelings or sentiments, and even of correcting our sense impressions. “‘Tis thus the understanding corrects the appearances of the senses, and makes us imagine, that an object at twenty foot distance seems even to the eye as large as one of the same dimensions at ten” (T 1.3.10.12, SBN 632).⁴⁷ He also speaks of correcting the moral sentiments, and then says: “Such corrections are common with regard to all the senses; and indeed ‘twere impossible we cou’d ever make use of language, or communicate our sentiments to one another, did we not correct the momentary appearances of things, and overlook our present situation” (T 3.3.1.16, SBN 582).⁴⁸

If we can correct our moral sentiments, and even our sense impressions, then surely we can correct our beliefs. This Hume suggests we can do on at least two occasions. First, he points out that whenever we make a causal judgment, there are both essential and superfluous circumstances. Where there is a great similarity of superfluous circumstances, but few of essential ones, we are tempted to make false causal judgments. Hume says that we “may correct this propensity by a reflection on the nature of those circumstances.” The second case occurs in the very same paragraph in which Hume talks about correcting “the appearances of the senses.” There he says: “A like reflection on *general rules* keeps us from augmenting our belief upon every encrease of the force and vivacity of our ideas. Where an opinion admits of no doubt, or opposite probability, we attribute to it a full conviction; tho’... its force [be] inferior to that of other opinions” (T 1.3.13.9, 1.3.10.12; SBN 148, 632). Here Hume explicitly differentiates between the degree of belief or assent, and the amount of force and vivacity, and

thus it looks as if beliefs can be corrected in the same way that sense impressions, passions and moral sentiments can be corrected.⁴⁹

IV CONCLUSION: IMPRESSIONS, IDEAS AND THE SCIENCE OF HUMAN NATURE

Hume's science of human nature was modeled on the physical sciences, which achieved such stunning successes in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The analogy between his intended methodology for his science of human nature and the physical sciences is revealed in the full title of the *Treatise: A Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects*. Hume thinks that humans have a nature and that it can be empirically investigated. Although practitioners of the science of human nature cannot hope to perform the "careful and exact experiments" of the physical sciences, they can "glean up our experiments in this science from a cautious observation of human life, and take them as they appear in the common course of the world, by men's behaviour in company, in affairs, and in their pleasures" (T Intro 8, 10; SBN xvii, xix). Such "cautious observation" is not simply a matter of paying attention to what was going on around one; it also involves the study of history and literature, ancient and modern:

Would you know the sentiments, inclinations, and course of life of the GREEKS and ROMANS? Study well the temper and actions of the FRENCH and ENGLISH: You cannot be much mistaken in transferring to the former *most* of the observations, which you have made with regard to the latter. Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular. Its chief use is only to discover the constant and universal principles of human nature... (EHU 8.7, SBN 83)

The reliance on careful observation is the central feature of Hume's methodology, and it has two consequences. One is his determination not to go beyond experience, and the other is the limitation of

explanation. Hume's theory of ideas and impressions, especially the Copy Principle, plays a crucial role in both of these. If all ideas are ultimately derived from impressions, from, that is, what we experience, the very content of our thought is limited by what we have experienced: "we can give no reason for our most general and most refin'd principles, beside our experience of their reality" (T Intro 9, SBN xviii). It is impossible to explain the ultimate principles of human nature; we just observe them. Hume's three principles of association are like this, as is the general desire of the good or the pleasant and the general aversion to the bad or the painful. His theory of impressions and ideas is the central part of, and partially instantiates, the empirical methodology of his science of human nature. Described at this level of generality, Hume's methodology and the role played by the theory of impressions and ideas is common both to the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*.

This essay is a study of how Hume's theory of impressions and ideas and his principles of association feature in the empirical methodology he uses to establish some of his most important positions, first, in Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*, and then later in the *Enquiry*. Simple ideas are derived from and exactly resemble simple impressions, and this fact is crucial to Hume's empirical establishment of "the first principle... in the science of human nature." Hume has little to say about sense impressions and their causes, though it is clear that they are judgments, and not simply sense data. Beliefs and their production in probable reasoning are explained, not by appeal to a traditional faculty of reason, but by the principles of association and the transfer of vivacity from impressions to ideas. A belief just is a forceful, vivacious idea. So one of the most important stories Hume has to tell in Book 1 of the *Treatise* relies crucially in all its aspects on the theory of impressions and ideas and the principles of association.

In a like manner, two of the most important accounts in Book 2 center round both association

and the theory of impressions and ideas. First, these components are used extensively in Hume's theory of the indirect passions, which Hume explicitly compares to his account of causal beliefs. Second, the mechanism of sympathy turns ideas into impressions. If ideas did not resemble and represent the impressions from which they were derived, this account would not work. Furthermore, association is used to explain just how through the operation of sympathy an idea can turn into an impression. Hume also compares the operations of sympathy with the operations of the understanding.

In the process of establishing the Copy Principle, the first principle in the science of human nature, Hume says that the subject of the *Treatise* is the full examination of ideas and impressions and of how these stand with respect to each other, especially causally.⁵⁰ This is a remarkable claim, but the way Hume develops his arguments and positions bears it out. All the issues we have explored in Books 1 and 2 come down to tracing the relations ideas bear to impressions and to one another. This has the effect of lessening the importance of faculties in Hume's account of the understanding and the will. As we have seen, Hume argues that a volition is simply an impression we feel when we move our body or give rise to a new perception of the mind.⁵¹ The will is the faculty that produces volitions, but appeal to such a faculty does no work for Hume. The work is done by tracing connections among such impressions and ideas as desires, aversions, and perceptions of pleasure and pain. Hume's account of reason, especially causal reason, is similarly deflationary. Reason is the faculty that gives rise to beliefs, but it is not an appeal to reason that explains why we have the beliefs we have or their nature. That work is done by appeal to the association of ideas set up by past experience, and by the enlivening of certain ideas related to present impressions. Although Hume is happy to talk about the senses, memory and reason, just as he is happy to talk about the will, all the real work of the mind is done by the connections, especially the associative and causal connections, among ideas and impressions.⁵²

NOTES

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- ¹ Rene Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch, 3 vols., (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 2: 25, 127.
- ² John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Nidditch (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1975), 1.1.8, 2.6.2.
- ³ Discussion of this important point is deferred until Part III below.
- ⁴ Perhaps the most important aspect of Hume's science of human nature is his determination not to go beyond experience, both with respect to the content of our mental states and with respect to the explanation of mental phenomena. As he says: "'tis still certain we cannot go beyond experience" (T Intro 8, SBN xvii).
- ⁵ In the *Enquiry*, Hume skips the step of establishing the correspondence rule and goes straight on to proving that "all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones" (EHU 2.5, SBN 19). The lack of the correspondence rule in the *Enquiry* leaves open a plausible option apparently ruled out by the presence of the rule in the *Treatise*: one might have a simple impression without a correspondent simple idea, though one cannot have a simple idea without a simple impression.
- ⁶ See also EHU 2.7, SBN 20.
- ⁷ Since the claims about impressions and ideas are empirical, it is of course possible to conceive that in a particular case, the order might be reversed. The missing shade of blue example (see T 1.1.1.10, SBN 5-6) might well be Hume's way of emphasizing the empirical nature of his claims.
- ⁸ T 2.1.2.4, SBN 277; see also T 2.3.9.2, SBN 438.
- ⁹ See the discussion at T 2.2.8.4, SBN 373-4, and "emotion" in the Glossary of the Oxford Philosophical Texts (OPT) edition of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. Fate Norton and M. J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 575.
- ¹⁰ Hume lists as possible causes of these original impressions "the constitution of the body," "the animal spirits" and "the application of objects to the external senses." Note that any of these causes might as well be causes of

bodily pains and pleasures as causes of impressions that come from the senses. The significance of our ignorance of the causes of original impressions is discussed in Part III below.

¹¹ In the same paragraph he says that original impressions “arise originally in the soul, or in the body, which-ever you please to call it.” I take the extremely casual nature of this controversial remark to be further evidence that Hume refuses to be drawn about the causal background of original impressions, including impressions of sensation

¹² “‘Tis easy to observe, that the passions, both direct and indirect, are founded on pain and pleasure, and that in order to produce an affection of any kind, ‘tis only requisite to present some good or evil” (T 2.3.9.1, SBN 438).

¹³ Hume has a rather deflationary account of the will. Although in THN 2.3.9.2, SBN 438 he counts “volition” as a direct passion, in THN 2.3.1.2, SBN 399 he says that the will, “properly speaking” is “not comprehended among the passions.” He goes on to define the will as “*the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind.*” I think the situation is this. The term, *the will*, is a term for a faculty; other faculties that Hume talks about include memory, the senses, the imagination, judgment and reason. Faculties produce impressions or ideas. Hume does not seem to have a term for the faculty that produces passions. Looked at in this way, of course, the will, as a faculty, is not a passion. But what the will produces, volitions, are passions. I describe this as a deflationary account of the will because Hume does not think that appeals to such a faculty is explanatory. What is important is not the postulation of faculties, but the tracing of causes and effects among impressions and ideas. An action is not explained by saying that it was caused by a volition, which was produced by the faculty of the will. It is explained by saying it was caused by a volition, which was caused by a desire or aversion, which was in turn caused by the perception of pleasure or pain. For additional discussion of the will, see the essay in this volume by Terence Penelhum.

¹⁴ For further discussion of this difficult distinction between the two classes of philosophical relations, see David Fate Norton, “Editor’s Introduction” to the *Treatise*, I24-7, and the Annotations to *Treatise* 1.3, 446-7, both in the OPT edition of the *Treatise*.

¹⁵ Hume's distinction between relations of ideas and matters of fact *seems* closer to our distinction between necessary and contingent than does the distinction found in the *Treatise*. It is extremely unclear how and to what extent Hume's thinking has changed and developed here. It is worth noting that Hume often uses the phrase "matter of fact" to mean "matters of fact that are not observed by the sense or memory," i.e., matters of fact that are the conclusions of causal inference. See the quotation from the *Enquiry* in note 17 below. For further discussion and references, see Norton, "Editor's Introduction" to the *Treatise*, I33 and note 38.

¹⁶ In spite of the fact that this geometrical example is Hume's own, a few pages later, Hume limits demonstrative reasoning to algebra and arithmetic. This is because in those subjects we have a "precise standard, by which we can judge of the equality and proportion of numbers." This standard is the "unite," so that we can always tell, no matter how long our demonstrative chain of ideas, when one number "has always a unite answering to every unite of the other" (THN 1.3.1.5, SBN 71). Hume appears to have dropped this limitation in the *Enquiry*.

¹⁷ The point is well made in the *Enquiry*: "It may, therefore, be a subject worthy of curiosity, to enquire what is the nature of that evidence, which assures us of any real existence and matter of fact, beyond the present testimony of our senses and memory . . . All reasonings concerning matter of fact seem to be founded on the relation of *Cause* and *Effect*" (EHU 4.3-4, SBN 26).

¹⁸ Although Hume wants his most basic principles to be "as universal as possible," he recognizes the "impossibility of explaining ultimate principles" (T Intro 8, SBN xvii; T Intro 10, SBN xviii).

¹⁹ Hume's first example of the association of ideas in the *Enquiry* is an instance of the association between an impression and an idea: "A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original" (EHU 3.3, SBN 24). An impression of a picture leads us, by means of the relation of resemblance, to think of what the picture is a picture of.

²⁰ This has come to be known as "the problem of induction." There is, of course, a huge literature on the subject. See Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chapter 4; Peter Millican, "Hume's Sceptical Doubts concerning Induction," in Peter Millican, ed.; *Reading Hume*

on *Human Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002); and Kenneth Winkler, "Hume's Inductive Scepticism," in Margaret Atherton, ed.; *The Empiricists; Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1999), 183-212.

²¹ It is important to realize that on Hume's view, as that of Descartes, we can make judgments or form beliefs with only one idea. Locke held the more traditional view, which Hume describes as "the separating or uniting of different ideas." Hume thinks this is a mistake because "'tis far from being true, that in every judgment, which we form, we unite two ideas; since in that proposition, *God is*, or indeed any other, which regards existence, the idea of existence is no distinct idea, which we unite with that of the object" (THN 1.3.7, n. 20, SBN 96, note). See Descartes' discussion of the idea of God and the existence of God in Meditation 3, and Locke's account of belief, opinion or assent in *Essay* 4.14-16.

²² Hume does not distinguish the belief from what is believed or what we might call the content of the belief.

²³ It is extremely difficult not to read this account into Hume's discussion of the same topic in the *Enquiry*. But in fact he never mentions either of these two uses of association in EHU 5, "Sceptical Solution of these Doubts." Nor, for that matter, does he describe what turns an idea into a belief as the very same thing as what distinguishes an idea from an impression, *viz.*, force and vivacity. There is no scholarly consensus as to whether Hume has changed his mind, or whether he has just suppressed technical details for ease of presentation.

²⁴ This claim creates difficulties for Hume. See Jane McIntyre, "Personal Identity and the Passions," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 545-57, and Donald Ainslie, "Scepticism about Persons in Book II of Hume's Treatise," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37 (1999): 333-61.

²⁵ In *Treatise* 3.3.1, "*Of the origin of the natural virtues and vices*," Hume argues "that sympathy is the source of the esteem, which we pay to all the artificial virtues" (T 3.3.1.9, SBN 577). Because sympathy is facilitated by resemblance, contiguity and causation, the esteem we feel will have a tendency to favour those who are closest to us, most resemble us or are linked to us by ties of blood. Sometimes this is appropriate. It is proper to favour one's own family, to some extent. But in general, we do not want our judgments of character to depend on these factors. So we must correct our moral sentiments, in just the way we correct our sense impressions and the

influence of the passions and our beliefs. See Part III of this paper, and J.L. Mackie, *Hume's Moral Theory* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), chap. 5, as well as Rachel Cohon, "The Common Point of View in Hume's Ethics," *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 57 (1997): 827-50. See also Jacqueline Taylor's essay in this volume.

²⁶ This difference is important. If a sensory idea actually turned into a sense impression, it would presumably be a hallucination. Part of the point of belief is to enable us to deal with objects or events that we are not currently experiencing, so beliefs could not perform their role if they were impressions. But they must imitate impressions in the sense that both involve judgments about existence.

²⁷ Note the suggestion that this tendency should be resisted. Here again we have a case where correction may be necessary. See the discussion in *Treatise* 2.1.11.9, SBN 320, and later on in the next section of this paper.

²⁸ Hume is explicit about this: "Our ideas are copy'd from our impressions, and represent them in all their parts;" "All ideas are deriv'd from, and represent impressions" (T 1.3.7.5, 1.3.14.11; SBN 96, 161).

²⁹ This is not to say that no questions of intentionality arise with respect to the passions. When we love, our love is directed towards another person, and hunger is often directed towards a certain item of food. We will return to this issue below.

³⁰ We should note that the question of representation does not arise for all impressions of sensation. Hume classifies the "pains and pleasures, that arise from the application of objects to our bodies" as impressions of sensation (T 1.4.2.12, SBN 192).

³¹ This ignorance is limited to impressions of sensation; we do of course know something of the causal origins of impressions of reflection. The difference seems to be that the causes of impressions of reflection are themselves perceptions of the mind.

³² See also T 1.2.6.7-9, SBN 68-9; EHU 12.11-14, SBN 152-4.

³³ This is a controversial claim. For a further defense, see Rachel Cohon and David Owen, "Representation, Reason and Motivation" *Manuscripto* 20 (1997), 47-76. For a contrary view, see Don Garrett, "Hume's Naturalistic Theory of Representation," *Syntheses* 152 (2006), 301-19.

³⁴ As we saw earlier, Hume sometimes uses “original” to describe something about human nature for which we have no explanation. For further discussion, see Miriam McCormick, “Hume on Natural Belief and Original Principles,” *Hume Studies* 19 (1993), 103-16.

³⁵ Hume thinks that his distinction between impressions and ideas, and his claim that we cannot know the causes of sensation, brings clarity to the debate about innate ideas. On a natural reading of innateness, the fact that all ideas are derived from impressions shows that no ideas are innate. But what about impressions? In the *Enquiry*, the fact that impressions are not copies of other mental items is enough to show that all impressions are innate (EHU 2, note 1, SBN 22n). In the body of the *Treatise*, Hume is more cautious, apparently not committing himself (T 1.1.1.12, SBN 7). The *Abstract* is ambiguous: “it is evident our stronger perceptions or impressions are innate, and that natural affection, love of virtue, resentment, and all the other passions, arise immediately from nature” (A 6, SBN 648). Hume could be saying here either that all impressions are innate (a reading in accord with the *Enquiry*), or just that impressions of reflection are.

³⁶ See for instance *Treatise* 2.2.2, *Experiments to confirm this system*.

³⁷ Intentionality is that characteristic of a mental state in virtue of which it is “of” or “about” something. So, typically, we think that our visual representation of a tree is of or about the tree. But a state can be intentional without being representational. When I am angry with you, my anger does not represent you, but it is directed at you.

³⁸ “Here then is a passion plac’d betwixt two ideas, of which the one produces it, and the other is produc’d by it. The first idea, therefore, represents the *cause*, the second the *object* of the passion” (T 2.1.2.4, SBN 278).

³⁹ Hume is actually talking about pride and humility here, but it is clear he intends the same to be true of the objects of love and hatred. Note again the use of “original” to describe something as a basic, unexplained part of human nature.

⁴⁰ “That we may understand the full force of this double relation, we must consider, that ‘tis not the present sensation alone or momentary pain or pleasure, which determines the character of any passion, but the whole bent or tendency of it from the beginning to the end” (T 2.2.9.2, SBN 381).

⁴¹ It seems so implausible that Annette Baier regards this claim of Hume's as an isolated mistake that should be ignored. See Annette C. Baier, *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's Sentiments* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991), chap. 6. For further discussion of this issue, see the essay below by Terence Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology."

⁴² Hume is usually perfectly happy to speak this way, in spite of his qualms about impressions of sensation representing something external to the mind.

⁴³ Although Hume claims that it is in general "impossible, that reason and passion can ever oppose each other," he is careful to add that there are two ways in which a passion may "be call'd unreasonable . . . when founded on a false supposition, or when it chooses means insufficient for the design'd end" (T 2.3.3.7, SBN 416).

⁴⁴ "The mind by an *original* instinct tends to unite itself with the good, and to avoid the evil, tho' they be conceiv'd merely in idea, and be consider'd as to exist in any future period of time" (T 2.3.9.2, SBN 438).

⁴⁵ Hume admits, quite rightly, that "there is no man so constantly possess'd of this virtue, as never on any occasion to yield to the solicitations of passion and desire." Nonetheless, calm passions can and do counter-act more violent passions. Hume says that it is "not the, which determines" us (T 2.3.4.10, SBN 418).

⁴⁶ See for instance App. 2-3, SBN 623-4.

⁴⁷ See also T 3.3.3.2, SBN 603.

⁴⁸ See note 25 above.

⁴⁹ Hume's distinguishing here between degree of assent and amount of force and vivacity is problematic for his theory of belief. According to the official theory, the degree of force and vivacity just is the degree of belief, so no such distinction is possible. It is not hard to think of ways to make the overall account consistent. He could distinguish first and second order beliefs: a first order belief may be initially strong, but we might have a second order belief that beliefs of the first sort tend to be misleading. This second order belief might actually cause the force and vivacity, that is, degree of assent, of the first order belief to decline. I am not suggesting Hume actually thought this, though it is a not implausible way of reading "We may correct this propensity by a reflection on the nature of those circumstances." The whole issue of the correction of belief, especially in the context of general

rules, including the rules by which to judge of causes and effects, is extremely interesting and deserves further study.

⁵⁰ “Let us consider how they stand with regard to their existence, and which of the impressions and ideas are causes, and which effects. The *full* examination of this question is the subject of the present treatise” (T 1.1.1.7, SBN 4).

⁵¹ See note 13 above.

⁵² For more on the topics treated here, see, in addition to the books and papers cited in earlier notes,

On the science of human nature

John Biro, “Hume’s New Science of Human Nature,” in this volume.

On ideas, impressions and the copy principle

Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), chap. 2.

Stephen Everson, “The Difference between Feeling and Thinking,” *Mind* 97 (1988) 401-13.

Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume’s Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chaps. 1-3.

On the indirect and direct passions

Páll S. Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume’s **Treatise***, 2nd edition (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), chap. 1.

Jane L. McIntyre, “Hume’s ‘New and Extraordinary’ Account of the Passions,” in *The Blackwell Guide to Hume’s **Treatise***, ed. Saul Traiger (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006): 199-215.

On belief

Martin Bell, “Belief and Instinct in Hume’s First *Enquiry*,” in ed. P. Millican, *Reading Hume on Human Understanding: Essays on the First **Enquiry*** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 175-185.

David Owen, “Locke and Hume on Belief, Judgment and Assent,” *Topoi* 22 (2003), 15-28.

David Fate Norton, “Of the Academical or Sceptical Philosophy,” in ed. P. Millican, *Reading Hume on*

*Human Understanding: Essays on the First **Enquiry*** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), 371-92.

On representation and the intentionality of the passions

Lilli Alanen, "Reflection and Ideas in Hume's Account of the Passions," in *Persons and Passions: Essays in Honor of Annette Baier*, ed. J. Jenkins, J. Whiting, and C. Williams (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005): 117-42.