

PHIL 5983: Hume and Practical Reasoning

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Hume, *Treatise*, 1.1.1-2 and 1.3.7–10

1.1.1

- 2 kinds of “perceptions of the human mind”: impressions and ideas. These differ only in their forcefulness, liveliness, or vivacity. Impressions include sensations, passions, and emotion. Ideas are copies of impressions that are used in thinking and reasoning. Each kind can be further divided into the simple (no parts) and the complex (has parts).

- Major Empiricist Claim: Every simple idea is derived from a simple impression, which it resembles. So, there are no innate ideas.

- There are a couple reasons to accept this claim. First, Hume offers a challenge: Come up with a counter-example. Second, he notes that the deprivation of a sense modality (e.g., deafness or blindness) guarantees deprivation of associated ideas (e.g., sound or color).

1.1.2

- Hume further distinguishes impressions into two camps: those of sensation and those of reflection. The latter category — which includes passions, desires, and emotions — is more suitable to philosophical investigation. Hume explains the distinction as follows:

The first kind arises in the soul originally, from unknown causes. The second is derived in a great measure from our ideas, and that in the following order. An impression first strikes upon the senses, and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain of some kind of other. Of this impression there is a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases; and this we call an idea. This idea of pleasure or pain, when it returns upon the soul, produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called impressions of reflexion, because derived from it.

1.3.7

- Believing something or affirming its existence in no way changes our idea of that thing. So, those who differ with respect to believing some proposition can nevertheless have the very same ideas in mind. Belief is a particular *manner* of conceiving those ideas.

An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd,
A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A
PRESENT IMPRESSION.

In the Appendix, Hume claims that belief consists in having a certain *feeling* toward a proposition, with certain consequences.

It [belief] gives them [ideas] more force and influence; makes them appear of greater importance; infixes them in the mind; and renders them the governing principles of all our actions.

1.3.8

- Hume discusses how present impressions tend to increase the vivacity of their resembling ideas. The relations of contiguity and causation have the same effect.
- All belief concerning matters of fact, which is always rooted in knowledge of causal relations, is governed by custom.

Objects have no discoverable connexion together; nor is it from any other principle but custom operating upon the imagination, that we can draw any inference from the appearance of one to the existence of another.

As Hume stresses, custom or habit is not a form of reasoning. Inductive generalizations are not accepted on rational grounds.

1.3.9

- Hume notes that the relations of contiguity and resemblance can also influence belief — e.g., trips to the Holy Land and the use of religious icons. Hume also discusses the influence of testimony and education on belief. The latter, in particular, relies on custom and repetition.

1.3.10

- Hume claims that the perception of pain/pleasure motivates all action. This “perception” can be either in the form of an impression or an idea.

- Hume notes some interesting ways in which the passions and emotions can influence belief — e.g., the coward more easily believes in danger, the depressed more easily believe negative news, etc.
- Our imaginations, as well as works of fiction, demand some illusion of reality in order to be entertaining.