

HUME'S DISTINCTION BETWEEN IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

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ABSTRACT

An important part of Hume's philosophy is grounded in a fundamental distinction between two kinds of perceptions: impressions and ideas. Existing views of the distinction are that the former are livelier than the latter, that the former are causally prior to the latter, that the latter are copies of the former, that the former but not the latter are perceptions of an objective realm, and that the former are feelings whereas the latter are thoughts. I argue that all of these views of the distinction are problematic, and should be replaced by the Reflection view, according to which (simple) ideas are, while impressions are not, the direct products of reflection on other perceptions.

1. Introduction

An important part of Hume's philosophy is grounded in a fundamental distinction between two kinds of perceptions: impressions and ideas. The standard Force and Vivacity view of this distinction is that it is grounded in a difference in degree of liveliness. But there are other views of the distinction. On the Causal Priority view, impressions are defined as causally prior to ideas. On the Copy Principle view, ideas are, while impressions are not, copies of other perceptions. On the Objective Realm view, impressions are, while ideas are not, perceptions of an objective realm. And on the Feeling/Thinking view, Hume's distinction is reducible to the intuitive difference between feeling (impressions) and thinking (ideas). I argue that all of these views of the distinction are problematic, and

should be replaced by the Reflection view, according to which (simple) ideas are, while impressions are not, the direct products of reflection on other perceptions.

I should say at the outset that I am focused not on features that all impressions happen to have and that all ideas happen to lack (or vice versa). It could happen, for all we know, that all impressions are perceived in the morning and all ideas are perceived in the evening, or that impressions make one anxious while ideas make one generous. These states of affairs, if they obtained, would count as non-criterial information *about* impressions and ideas, mere symptoms of the distinction. The relevant question is not ‘How are impressions different from ideas?’, but rather ‘What *makes* a perception an idea, as opposed to an impression?’ It is the nature or essence of Hume’s impression/idea distinction that we are seeking.

2. *The Force and Vivacity View*

The Force and Vivacity view is that the criterial difference between impressions and ideas is that the former are forceful and vivid, while the latter are faint and weak. It is no surprise that this is the standard picture of Hume’s distinction, given that there are many texts to support it. Here is a representative sample (underlining has been added):

All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*... By *ideas* I mean

the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning. (T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 1 – see also E 2.3: 96-97)¹

All the perceptions of the mind are of two kinds, *viz.* impressions and ideas, which differ from each other only in their different degrees of force and vivacity. (T 1.3.7.5: 67; SBN 96 – see also T 1.3.8.11: 72; SBN 103 and T 2.1.11.7: 207; SBN 318-319)

I have underlined words in these passages to emphasize the fact that Hume appears to be saying that there are *no differences* between impressions and ideas *apart from* the fact that the former are more vivid and lively than the latter, and that this difference in degree of force and vivacity is what the relevant distinction *consists in*.²

The main problem with the Force and Vivacity view is that it does not classify perceptions in the way that Hume does. If impressions differ from ideas only in degree of force and vivacity, then we should find Hume saying that forceful and vivid hallucinations, memory perceptions, and beliefs are impressions. Unfortunately, Hume claims that such experiences are *ideas*: forceful and lively ideas, to be sure, but ideas nonetheless.³ Similarly, on the same interpretive theory, we should find Hume saying that faint passions and sensations are ideas. Unfortunately, Hume claims that such experiences are *impressions*: faint and languid impressions, to be sure, but impressions nonetheless.⁴

It follows that the Force and Vivacity view is saddled with what I will call ‘the Problem of Extensional Inadequacy’: the view classifies as impressions some perceptions that Hume classifies as ideas, and classifies as ideas some perceptions that Hume classifies

as impressions. This is a serious difficulty, one that counts as a serious strike against any interpretation of Hume to which it applies.⁵

In defense of the Force and Vivacity view, it might be argued that Hume's statements to the effect that impressions sometimes cannot be *distinguished* from ideas (e.g., at E 2.1: 96) should be read as making an *epistemic* point rather than a *metaphysical* point. Hume, it might be claimed, is saying no more than that we sometimes find ourselves unable to *tell* whether a perception's degree of force and vivacity exceeds or falls short of the threshold separating impressions from ideas. And this seems to be consistent with the claim that the relevant degree of force and vivacity actually places the perception above (or below) the threshold. However, although Hume *sometimes* waxes epistemic, his prose is often most naturally read as having metaphysical import. Though he tells us, for example, that 'it sometimes happens...that we cannot distinguish [our impressions] from our ideas', he also intimates that the explanation for this is that, in those cases, 'our impressions are...faint and low' (T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 2). And when he says that it can happen that ideas are 'as vivid and intense as...the present impressions of the senses' (T 1.3.10.9: 84; SBN 123), he is conveying information about the metaphysical features of certain perceptions, not merely information about our inability to tell whether they are best categorized as impressions.⁶

Proponents of the Force and Vivacity view have also urged that Hume is not really committed to the claim that ideas can be as vivid as impressions or that impressions can be as faint as ideas: the proposition in the vicinity to which he *is* committed, they say, is that the degree of vivacity possessed by impressions can *approach*, without actually being able

to reach, the degree of vivacity possessed by ideas (and vice versa). As Noonan puts the point:

Hume acknowledges that in particular instances ‘they [i.e., impressions and ideas] may very nearly approach each other’ [T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 2] and so be mistaken for one another, but even in such cases there is only a ‘near resemblance’ [T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 2]. (1999: 61)⁷

And, indeed, there is considerable textual evidence for this interpretation (beyond the evidence of T 1.1.1.1, and a companion passage at App. 9: 398; SBN 627)—see, in particular: (T 1.3.7.5, fn. 20: 67; SBN 97, fn. 1), (T 1.3.10.3: 82; SBN 119), (App. 3: 397; SBN 624-625), (T 2.1.11.7: 207-208; SBN 319), and (T 2.2.5.4: 232; SBN 358).

The textual evidence, such as it is, suggests that Hume may be exaggerating when he describes hallucinated (or believed, or remembered) ideas to be *as vivid* as impressions, and that the same might be true of his descriptions of the relative faintness of some impressions, whether of sensation or reflection. However, I think there is a better explanation for the apparent inconsistency between the passages that support the thesis that Hume takes some impressions and ideas to possess *equal* levels of vivacity and the passages that support the claim that Hume thinks that lively ideas do no more than *approach* impressions in terms of vivacity. Hume tells us no more than that lively beliefs, lively ideas of pain and pleasure, and lively ideas of contiguous objects possess a force and vivacity that approaches the force and vivacity of impressions. In all these passages, Hume does not say, nor do the texts imply, that it could *never* happen that an idea possesses a

level of vivacity that is *equal to* the level of vivacity of a typical impression, or that an impression possesses a level of vivacity that is *equal to* the level of vivacity of a typical idea (say, of imagination). Hume is making general remarks about a large number of ideas and impressions of certain kinds under certain conditions, and, as I will now argue, there is some evidence to the effect that this is exactly how Hume himself conceives of what he is saying.

At the beginning of Book 2 of the *Treatise*, Hume tells us that the ‘division [between calm and violent reflective impressions] is far from being exact’, for it can happen that impressions that are usually calm (as in the case of poetry or music) ‘rise to the highest height’, while impressions that are usually violent (such as passions) ‘may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible’. But this does not mean that the distinction between calm and violent impressions of reflection is unhelpful, for it remains true that ‘in general the passions are more violent than the emotions arising from beauty and deformity’ (T 2.1.1.3: 181-182; SBN 276). Some passions, then, are very calm, indeed, virtually imperceptible. But this does not disprove the *general* claim that passions are intense and violent. I submit that the division of impressions and ideas in terms of force and vivacity is no more than a generalization of this kind: it is true that, *in general*, impressions are more lively and vivid than ideas, but this fact is *compatible* with the claim that, *in exceptional cases*, impressions are just as lively and vivid (or just as faint and languid) as ideas.

In the first place, Hume explicitly claims that propositions that are *true in general* admit of exceptions. The most famous example of this is his Copy Principle, which he describes as the ‘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 (T 1.1.1.7: 9; SBN 4). Despite its generality, Hume explicitly allows the existence of ‘one contradictory phenomenon, which may prove, that ’tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions’ (T 1.1.1.10: 9; SBN 5). This is the case of the simple idea of the missing shade of blue, which, when appropriately stimulated by impressions of a ‘continual gradation of shades’ of blue, we can conjure up by means of our imagination without having been stimulated by an impression of *that particular shade*. Hume concludes that the existence of such a phenomenon ‘may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always deriv’d from the correspondent impressions; tho’ the instance is so particular and singular, that ’tis scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we shou’d alter our general maxim’ (T 1.1.1.10: 10; SBN 6).

There is textual evidence, even at T 1.1.1.1, that Hume accepts something similar in the case of the proposition that impressions are more vivid than ideas:

Thus in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas. But notwithstanding this near resemblance in a few instances, they are in general so very different, that no one can make a scruple to rank them under distinct heads, and assign to each a peculiar name to mark the difference. (T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 2—underlining added)

Hume's claim here, taken quite literally, is that impressions are *in general* very different from ideas in terms of force and vivacity. This claim is compatible with there being a 'near resemblance' between the level of vivacity belonging to an impression and the level of vivacity belonging to an idea in a few notable instances (such as dreams and hallucinations). It does not follow from this that Hume thinks that the intensity of hallucinations can *equal* the intensity of ordinary impressions of sensation. But he is very close to acknowledging this fact, as he explicitly does in other passages, as we have seen.

Further textual support for interpreting Hume's claim that ideas can do no more than *approach* impressions in terms of vivacity as a *general* truth derives from Hume's use of the word 'natural' (and its cognates) to describe the difference in vivacity between impressions and ideas:

Impressions are naturally the most vivid perceptions of the mind. (T 1.4.2.41: 138;
SBN 208 – underlining added)

All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure...On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid. (E 2.9: 99 – underlining added)

Hume is telling us here, not that *all* impressions are more vivid than *all* ideas, not that *all* ideas are fainter than *all* impressions, but rather that there is a *natural* difference in vivacity between impressions and ideas. What does he mean by this?

It is helpful here that Hume himself explicitly addresses the question of the meaning of ‘natural’. What he tells us is that ‘there is [no word] more ambiguous and equivocal’ (T 3.1.2.7: 304; SBN 474). There are, he says, three things one might mean in calling something ‘natural’: first, that it is not miraculous; second, that it is not rare or unusual; and third, that it is not artificial (i.e., the result of artifice or convention) (T 3.1.2.7-9: 304-305; SBN 473-475—see also E 2.9, fn. 1: 99-100). Clearly, then, in saying that impressions are naturally more vivid than ideas, what Hume means is not that it is not miraculous, nor that it is not the result of artifice, that impressions are more vivid than ideas: what he means is that it is *neither rare nor unusual* for impressions to be more vivid than ideas. In other words, what Hume is telling us is that it is *generally true* that impressions are more vivid than ideas.

Note that Hume also claims that the difference between impressions and ideas is *original*: ‘[T]he different degrees of force make all the original difference betwixt an impression and an idea’ (T 1.3.10.3: 82; SBN 119 – underlining added). This suggests another way to understand the role that vivacity plays in relation to Hume’s distinction. When an impression first enters the mind, it is vivid. That impression is then copied and the idea of it that is formed *at that time* is always and inevitably less vivid than the impression from which it is copied. This is an *original* difference in vivacity between a (simple) impression and the (simple) idea that represents it. This thesis leaves open the possibility that mental mechanisms can enliven ideas that were less vivid when first acquired, thereby endowing them with a degree of vivacity that is equal to the degree of vivacity of impressions when first acquired. The thesis also leaves open the possibility that mental mechanisms can diminish the force of impressions that were extremely vivid when

first acquired, thereby endowing them with a degree of vivacity that is more typical of ideas.

Rather than contradicting himself or engaging in exaggeration, I suggest that Hume is actually, somewhat infelicitously, trying to convey two propositions that he takes to be (and that, in fact, are) mutually compatible: (1) that impressions are *generally* or *naturally* (and also, *originally*) more vivid than ideas, and (2) that *some* impressions are *as vivid* as *some* ideas. There are two main reasons to prefer this interpretation.

First, on the philosophical side, it is clear that Hume countenances mechanisms that increase the vivacity of ideas and other mechanisms that decrease the vivacity of impressions. According to the exaggeration hypothesis, Hume must hold that it is *impossible* for such mechanisms to produce ideas that are as vivid as impressions or to produce impressions that are as faint as ideas. For if it were *possible* for some ideas to equal some impressions in vivacity, then it would be a mistake to treat force and vivacity as *criterial* for the impression/idea distinction. And yet it would be unacceptably *ad hoc* for Hume to claim that there must be an upper bound for all enlivening mechanisms and a lower bound for all dampening or deadening mechanisms. Unless there is empirical evidence that these mechanisms are subject to these bounds (evidence that Hume does not provide), Hume should acknowledge that there is nothing in principle to stop them from producing impressions and ideas that possess the same level of force and vivacity.

Second, given that Hume *often* characterizes the difference in force and vivacity between impressions and ideas as *natural* (in the sense of ‘general’) or *original*, it is reasonable to suppose that Hume takes the ‘natural’ or ‘original’ qualification for granted in the rest of his statements to the effect that impressions are more forceful and vivid than

ideas, and that ideas can do no more than approach impressions in terms of force and vivacity. In other words, it is reasonable to suppose that Hume would want his readers to understand him to be saying, not that ideas and impressions could not *possibly* possess the same degree of force and vivacity, but that ideas are *generally* or *originally* less forceful and vivid than the impressions from which they are copied.

I conclude that the Force and Vivacity view cannot escape from the Problem of Extensional Inadequacy by appealing to the exaggeration hypothesis.

3. *The Causal Priority View*

According to the Causal Priority view, the one feature that distinguishes impressions from ideas is that the former are causally prior to the latter. Flage (1990) points to two passages that underline the priority of impressions. First, Hume tells us that ‘under this name [i.e., ‘impression’] I comprehend all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul’ (T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 1—see also T 2.1.1.1: 181; SBN 275 and E 2.1: 96). This suggests, correctly, that impressions are temporally prior to (their corresponding) ideas. Second, there is the causal aspect of Hume’s Copy Principle, namely, that ‘our impressions are the causes of our ideas, not our ideas of our impressions’ (T 1.1.1.8: 9; SBN 5). Flage concludes that ‘[i]t is primarily on the basis of the [causal] priority of impressions to ideas that Hume divides the class of perceptions into impressions and ideas’ (1990: 21). Recognizing the problems faced by the Force and Vivacity view, Norton (2000: 117) concurs: ‘Hume...argues that the real and fundamental difference between impressions and ideas is that the latter are causally dependent on the former’.

One worry about the Causal Priority view is that not all impressions in the mind are temporally prior to ideas. As Hume emphasizes, in many (though not all) cases, impressions of reflection (such as desires and aversions, hope and fear) are caused by, and hence are temporally and causally posterior to, the ‘idea of pleasure or pain’ (T 1.1.2.1: 11; SBN 7-8; T 2.1.1.1: 181; SBN 275). So it cannot be that what distinguishes impressions from ideas is that *all* instances of the former temporally precede *all* instances of the latter. Rather, the Causal Priority view must say that what makes one member of a pair of corresponding (i.e., resembling) perceptions the impression and the other the idea is that the former is causally (and so, temporally) prior to the latter. If a perception causes a similar perception, then the former perception must be an impression and the latter perception must be its correspondent idea. Unfortunately, this criterion conflicts with Hume’s thesis that an idea can give rise to another idea that copies (and so both resembles and represents) it, as when one remembers a past idea (T 1.3.8.16: 74; SBN 106). For if one focuses on the pair consisting of an idea and one’s memory of it (an idea that represents the first idea), the first member of the pair is not an impression but rather an idea.⁸

A more serious objection to the Causal Priority view stems from the way in which Hume argues for the Copy Principle. As Flage (1990: 22-23) and Norton (2000: I17-I18) themselves recognize, Hume’s argument for the Copy Principle relies on experience and observation. It is ‘by constant experience’ that Hume finds that ‘the simple impressions always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas’ and that ‘any impression either of the mind or body is constantly follow’d by an idea, which resembles it’ (T 1.1.1.8: 9; SBN 5—see also T 1.1.1.9: 9; SBN 5 and E 2.6-7: 97-98). But if the causal priority of

impressions to ideas is established by *experience*, then causal priority cannot be the *criterion or defining feature* for distinguishing between impressions and ideas.⁹

4. *The Copy Principle View*

One might have thought that the problems with the Causal Priority view would apply to a superficially similar proposal, defended by Landy (2006), that relies on the fact that ideas are copies to distinguish between impressions and ideas. Landy's proposal is that (simple) perceptions are ideas precisely because they are copies of other perceptions, whereas (simple) perceptions are impressions precisely because they are not copies of other perceptions (2006: 124-125). But if what *makes* a (simple) perception an idea is that it is copied from another perception, then why does Hume find himself arguing, on the basis of observation and experience, that (simple) ideas are copied from (simple) impressions? To this reasonable question, Landy offers a clever answer.

Landy claims that, as Hume sees it, we (i.e., ordinary folk) sort perceptions intuitively and pretheoretically into two groups, based on three considerations: (1) the intuitive difference between feeling and thinking, (2) the use of 'paradigmatic examples of each' (sensations, emotions, and passions in the case of impressions, memories in the case of ideas), and (3) appeal to 'certain phenomenal qualities (degree of force and vivacity) by which each is commonly recognized' (2006: 128-129). The question now becomes whether 'so sorting our perceptions corresponds to any *real* difference of kind among those perceptions' (2006: 129), and Hume's answer to *this* question is the Copy Principle, thought of as a '*theoretical explanatory principle*' (2006: 130). The fact that (simple) ideas are copies of (simple) impressions is 'what grounds our intuitive, pre-theoretical sorting of

our mental entities into these two classes; that is, it is this difference that *accounts for* our sorting our perceptions this way' (2006: 129).

The model here, we may presume, is something like the scientific investigation of the nature of water. At first, we folk intuitively and pre-theoretically distinguish between water and other liquids by its superficial characteristics (its relative transparency, odorlessness, viscosity), where it is found (lakes, rivers, oceans), and the use of paradigms ('*this* is water, *that* is not'). Thereafter, we investigate the nature of water and discover, say, that it has the molecular structure of H₂O. We then report that what *makes* this or that liquid substance *water* is not its superficial characteristics (which could, after all, be shared by some other substance, XYZ), but rather its particular molecular structure. It is *this* sort of investigation into the nature of our perceptions in which Landy takes Hume to be engaging. And the reason why this proposal is clever is that it fully accommodates Hume's way of arguing for the Copy Principle. Just as it makes sense for chemists to conduct an empirical investigation of water that leads to the discovery of its nature, so it makes sense, on Landy's account, for Hume to conduct an empirical investigation of impressions and ideas that leads to a discovery of the nature of each (namely, that the latter are copies of the former).

However, the Copy Principle view has two serious disadvantages. To his credit, Landy acknowledges one of these problems. As we have seen, Hume finds a counterexample to the Copy Principle, a perception of the missing shade of blue. The existence of an idea of a particular shade of blue conjured up by the imagination when the mind is presented with a continual gradation of shades with one noticeable discontinuity 'may serve as a proof' that the Copy Principle, taken as a universal claim about *all* ideas

and impressions, is false (T 1.1.1.10: 10; SBN 6). But if one's perception of the missing shade is not in fact copied from a precedent impression, then, according to the Copy Principle view, it is not an idea, but an impression. Yet Hume insists that the relevant perception of the missing shade is an idea.

Landy's reply to this objection is that the perception of the missing shade of blue is an idea that 'resembles the impressions that caused it in such a way that it is *as good as* a copy of those impressions' (2006: 133). The perception of the missing shade is produced by looking at a sequence of many other shades, each of which counts as an impression (because it is not copied from another perception). We can think of these impressions as *causing* the perception of the missing shade. Moreover, these impressions *resemble* the perception of the missing shade, especially given that they are all shades of the same color. But causation and close resemblance, taken together, are sufficient for the existence of a copy relation (T 1.1.1.7-9: 9; SBN 4-5). It follows, argues Landy, that causation and a slightly-less-close resemblance, taken together, are sufficient for the existence of an as-good-as-a-copy relation (2006: 133-134).

One problem with Landy's reply is that the as-good-as-a-copy relation is not the same as the straightforward copy relation. As close to a copy as the idea of the missing shade might be, it is not, according to Hume, a *real* copy of any precedent perception(s). But the result of Hume's empirical investigation of impressions and ideas is not that every simple idea is as-good-as-a-copy of a simple impression: the result is that every simple idea is a *real* copy of a simple impression. So Landy's conception of how the Copy Principle view might handle the missing shade of blue counterexample does not fit with the way Hume introduces, deploys, and defends the principle.

A second, more serious problem for Landy's proposal beckons. On Landy's reconstruction, Hume's claim that ideas are copies of impressions is necessary: if it were possible for an idea not to be a copy of an impression, then it wouldn't be true that what *makes* a perception an idea is that it is copied from an impression. (Similarly, the claim that water is H_2O is necessary, because what makes a particular portion of stuff water is that it is composed of molecules formed in the right way from two atoms of hydrogen and one atom of oxygen.) But Hume's claim that ideas are copies of impressions is *a posteriori*: it is only as a result of empirical observation of perceptions classified into two classes that we discover that the members of the latter class resemble and are caused by members of the former class. The problem is that, *by Hume's own account*, it is impossible for there to be necessarily true *a posteriori* propositions.

In the *Enquiry*, Hume divides all the 'objects of human reason or enquiry' into 'two kinds, to wit, *Relations of Ideas* and *Matters of Fact*' (E 4.1: 108). Relations of ideas are 'either intuitively or demonstratively certain' and 'discoverable by the mere operation of thought'. Matters of fact, by contrast, are such that their contraries are possible and 'can never imply a contradiction' (and thus contingent) and can only be discovered by looking at something that is somewhere 'existent in the universe' (and thus *a posteriori*). This division of propositions, commonly known as 'Hume's Fork', does not make room for the necessary *a posteriori* (a category of proposition that wasn't clearly recognized until the second half of the twentieth century—see, e.g., Kripke (1972)). Given his 'Fork', Hume could not accept Landy's interpretation without rendering his own views about the metaphysico-epistemic status of the Copy Principle inconsistent. According to Hume, it is simply not *possible* to discover the nature or essence of the impression-idea distinction by

looking for general patterns that obtain among perceptions that are pre-theoretically sorted into two groups in the way Landy suggests. The most that Hume would be entitled to conclude about the members of these two groups is an empirical generalization to the effect that most simple perceptions belonging to the second group are copied from simple perceptions belonging to the first group. Such an empirical generalization, though it might be symptomatic of the impression-idea distinction, would not be criterial in the right way, inasmuch as it would not tell us what makes *this* perception an impression and *that* perception an idea.¹⁰

5. *The Objective Realm View*

Some scholars believe that Hume distinguishes between impressions and ideas on the basis of objectivity. As Bennett (1971: 224) describes the distinction: ‘impressions occur only in experience of the objective realm’, while ‘ideas occur only in thinking and reasoning’ (see also Bennett (2002: 98-99)). As we have seen, Hume takes there to be a fundamental difference in kind between sense-perceptions and the hallucinations of a madman. For adherents of the Objective Realm view, the former are, while the latter are not, ‘experiences had when people really perceive physical objects’ (Dicker (1998: 6)). And the thought is that it is *this* difference that grounds the impression/idea distinction.

Proponents of the Objective Realm view claim that there is considerable textual evidence to support it. Bennett (2002: 98) refers to a passage in which Hume writes: “Tis confess, that no object can appear to the senses; or in other words, that no impression can become present to the mind, without being determin’d in its degrees both of quantity and quality” (T 1.1.7.4: 18; SBN 19). The thought here is that impressions are identified with

precisely those perceptions in which objects in an external world appear to the senses. But there are two problems with this reading. The first is that Hume's use of 'in other words' is, as he well knows, infelicitous, for it is not only when objects appear to the senses that impressions are present to the mind. Secondary impressions (such as emotions, passions, desires, aversions, and volitions) are present to the mind even in the absence of any (noticeable) sensory stimulation. The second is that Hume does not actually say that the objects that 'appear to the senses' exist in an 'objective realm' external to the mind. As we will see, this is as it should be, given his other commitments.

Dicker (1998: 6) points to more passages in defense of the Objective Realm view. In the *Abstract* to the *Treatise*, Hume writes that 'when we...have the images of external objects conveyed by our senses; the perception of the mind is...an *impression*' (Abs. 5: 408; SBN 647). But there are two problems with this quotation. The first is that some of the elided material speaks against the Objective Realm view. What Hume says, more fully rendered, is that 'when we feel a passion or emotion of any kind, or have the images of external objects conveyed to our senses; the perception of the mind is what he [i.e., the author of the Treatise] calls an *impression*' (underlining added). So here Hume includes passions and emotions within the category of impressions, despite the fact that they do not represent anything in an objective realm. The second is that Hume uses the *Abstract* to bring in readers he knows are tempted to think that there is such a thing as an external world, and quite possibly uses terminology they would be comfortable with to advertise the contents of his book, knowing full well all the while that there are very good reasons, spelled out at some length in the *Treatise* itself (at T 1.4.2), to mistrust the senses as a source of information about anything external to the mind.

In another passage Dicker cites, Hume contrasts ‘[t]hat idea of red, which we form in the dark’ with ‘that impression, which strikes our eyes in the sun-shine’ (T 1.1.1.5: 8; SBN 3). But here again, Hume is using ‘objective realm’ language to help the reader identify perceptions without being committed to the existence of an objective realm. Hume is not presupposing the existence or absence of light external to the mind even before he considers the question of ‘scepticism with regard to the senses’ (T 1.4.2; SBN 187). Darkness and sunshine can be identified phenomenologically (‘*this* is what a perception of dark look like’, ‘*that* is what a perception of sunshine feels like’), in just the way that any idealist would do.

There are, in fact, two systematic reasons to think that the Objective Realm view does not capture the basis of Hume’s distinction. The first is that passions, emotions, desires, and volitions count as impressions on Hume’s account, even though none of them is the representation of an object or property in a world external to the mind. (Bennett (2002: 98-99) himself recognizes this, but does not draw the conclusion that Hume disavows the Objective Realm view itself.) The second is that Hume is *officially* sceptical about the existence and nature of an external world, even if he finds himself ‘absolutely and necessarily determin’d to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life’ (T 1.4.7.10: 175; SBN 269). It would therefore be odd in the extreme for him to presuppose the existence of a world outside his mind in drawing the very distinction that partially grounds his arguments for scepticism.

6. *The Feeling/Thinking View*

One option that makes sense of some of what Hume says is to suppose that he means us to use the intuitive, pre-theoretical understanding of the distinction between feeling and thinking to draw the impression/idea distinction. We have already seen that Hume thinks that everyone will readily perceive the difference between feeling and thinking. Perhaps *this* is all there is to the distinction between impressions and ideas: impressions are just those perceptions that are (intuitively) *felt*, while ideas are just those perceptions that are (intuitively) *thought*. Stroud (1977: 28) suggests that this is ‘Hume’s general aim in making the distinction’, and that the Force and Vivacity view is his (in the end, unsuccessful) way of cashing it out.

The main problem with this view is that some of the perceptions Hume classifies as ideas are clearly felt, if anything is. Recall that Hume takes hallucinations to be ideas, not impressions. But there is no doubt that, in an intuitive or pre-theoretical sense of ‘felt’, many (perhaps all) hallucinations are felt, assuming that sensations are felt. Schizophrenic patients often experience vivid auditory hallucinations. Temporal lobe epilepsy can produce vivid, usually unpleasant, gustatory or olfactory hallucinations. Patients who suffer from delusional parasitosis or who have ingested toxic stimulants (such as methamphetamines) often experience formication, a hallucinatory sensation as of ants crawling all over one’s skin. In all these cases, patients report that they are *feeling* something, not that they are *thinking* something (although, of course, what they are feeling may lead them to form certain thoughts or beliefs). Indeed, it is precisely the fact that hallucinations are phenomenally indistinguishable from veridical *sensations* that leads both patients and diagnosticians to describe them as ‘felt’. So Hume’s unequivocal classification of hallucinations as ideas is inconsistent with the Feeling/Thinking view,

according to which ideas are defined as perceptions that are (intuitively) thought but not felt.¹¹

It might be suggested, in defense of the Feeling/Thinking view, that in classifying impressions as felt and ideas as thought Hume is merely systematizing our pre-theoretical classifications, in a way that allows him room to correct some of them (a phenomenon similar to reflective equilibrium). The instance of felt hallucinations might then be described as a case in point: Hume sees a pre-theoretical difference between perceptions that are felt and those that are thought, classifies the former as impressions and the latter as ideas, and then finds reason to dismiss one conclusion of this classificatory scheme, namely that hallucinations are impressions.¹² But, on this interpretation, what reason could Hume have to dismiss this conclusion? In the case of reflective equilibrium, intuitions can be jettisoned when they conflict with firmly held theoretical beliefs at higher levels of generality that are formed under epistemically optimal conditions. But what would play the role of relevant theoretical belief sufficient to justify jettisoning the claim that hallucinations are impressions? Nothing that is itself based on an account of the impression-idea distinction itself. And this makes it difficult to see what could play such a role in Hume's theory. In the absence of a good reason to dismiss the relevant conclusion, Hume should retain it. But he doesn't. And this strongly suggests that he wouldn't accept any account, such as the Feeling/Thinking view, that leads to such a conclusion.

7. The Reflection View

What, then, is the ground of Hume's distinction? On what basis does he distinguish between impressions and ideas?

The answer, I suggest, derives from a fuller appreciation of Hume's theory of mind. Thus far, we have been looking at Hume's descriptions of mental *contents*, but we have not paid any attention to his theory of mental *operations* or *acts*.

Hume thinks that the mind *does* things with its perceptions, some of them through its faculty of imagination. Thanks to this faculty, the mind is free '*to transpose and change its ideas*' (T 1.1.3.4: 12; SBN 10). The imagination, Hume says, is 'the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience' (E 2.5: 97). It can *unite* different ideas and thereby form complex ideas of various kinds, including ideas of substances and modes (T 1.1.6.2: 16; SBN 16 and T 1.1.6.3: 16; SBN 17). The imagination can *separate* ideas that are commonly joined, such as 'the idea of a cause' and the idea 'of a beginning of existence' (T 1.3.3.3: 56; SBN 79-80). In addition to combining and separating ideas, the imagination can *compare* them, and thereby form ideas of relations (T 1.1.5.1: 14; SBN 13-14). In sum: 'Nothing is more free than the imagination of man: and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas, furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision' (E 5.10: 124).

The mental acts performed by the imagination are sometimes voluntary, sometimes involuntary. Hume points out that the imagination can separate ideas and then put ideas together, and thereby create '[t]he fables we meet with in poems and romances', in which '[n]ature there is totally confounded, and nothing mention'd but winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants' (T 1.1.3.4: 12; SBN 10). It should be clear here that the mental operation of separating the idea of a wing from the other ideas with which it is

conjoined in the complex idea of a bird, as well as the mental operation of combining the idea of a wing with the idea of a horse in such a way as to produce the complex idea of a winged horse, are performed voluntarily. But sometimes the imagination conceives ideas automatically or non-voluntarily, as when ‘the hearing of [a name that applies to several objects] revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions’ (T 1.1.7.7: 19; SBN 20—see also T 1.1.7.8: 19; SBN 21).

The imagination is not the only faculty in Hume’s mental economy responsible for mental acts. The memory is a power of copying perceptions (as ideas) in such a way as to preserve their ‘original order and position’ (T 1.3.5.3: 59; SBN 85—see also T 1.1.3.2-3: 12; SBN 9). The understanding engages in two kinds of operations, (i) ‘the comparing of ideas’ and thereby judging ‘from demonstration...as it regards abstract relations of ideas’, and (ii) ‘the inferring of matter of fact’ and thereby judging from ‘probability; as it regards...those relations of objects, of which experience only gives us information’ (T 3.1.1.18: 298; SBN 463 and T 2.3.3.2: 265; SBN 413). Although the understanding operates voluntarily, the memory can operate either voluntarily or non-voluntarily. ‘When I shut my eyes and think of my chamber,’ says Hume, ‘the ideas I form are exact representations of the impressions I felt’ (T 1.1.1.3: 8; SBN 3). In such a case, the memory is prompted by the will to remember. In other cases, though, as Hume is well aware, memories sometimes come to us unbidden, in a flash, prompted by descriptions of circumstances that somehow trigger non-voluntary recollection (T 1.3.5.4: 60; SBN 627-628).

Another power that Hume mentions several times is the faculty of reflection. Given how important reflection is to his mental economy, it is unfortunate that Hume does less in the way of explicating the nature or function of this faculty than he does in the way of explicating the nature or function of any of the others. If we are to settle on an interpretation of Hume's conception of this faculty, then, we have no choice but to engage in rational reconstruction that coheres with, and makes good sense, of what Hume tells us about reflection. What follows is my best attempt at such a reconstruction.

To reflect is to consider a perception *as* a perception, and think *about* (*of, on*) it as a whole. Unlike mixing, combining, separating, and dividing, reflection is a *second-order* mental operation: it doesn't work *with* perceptions, but rather treats them as intentional objects. With the help of my imagination, I can take a perception of white and put it together (in the right way) with the perceptions of a long straight spiralled horn, the head and body of a horse, and a flowing mane and tail, and thereby form the (complex) perception of a unicorn. But with the help of my faculty of reflection, I can also reflect on, or think about, the (first-order) perception of white, recognizing it *as* a perception of white. When I do this, I form a second-order perception, one that *represents* the (first-order) perception of white. *This* new, second-order perception, the direct product of the mental operation of reflection applied to the mind's perceptions, is an idea. Indeed, according to the Reflection view, to be the direct product of the mental act of reflection on a perception is precisely *what it is to be* an idea. Every other perception in the mind counts as an impression.

To be more precise, I should say that, for Hume, being the direct product of reflection is what it is to be a *simple* idea. Simple ideas are ideas that have no other ideas

as parts. Complex ideas, which have other ideas as parts, are formed by the mental operation of combination. The Reflection view is that simple ideas, not complex ideas, are defined as the direct products of reflection on other perceptions.¹³

It is important to emphasize that on the Reflection view the causal relation that defines what it is to be an idea is *direct*. Suppose, for example, that an act of reflection on an impression, M, produces a simple idea, I, which then produces a passion, P. We can say, rightly, that P is produced by reflection. But whereas reflection on M produces I *directly* (or immediately), reflection on M produces P *indirectly* (or meditately). For the production of P by reflection is mediated by the (direct) production of I. If what it is to be an idea is to be produced by reflection (whether directly or indirectly), then P, an impression, would (mistakenly) count as an idea. Because the Reflection view defines ideas to be those perceptions that are *directly* or *immediately* produced by reflection, it does not mistakenly count P as an idea.¹⁴

It should be emphasized that the textual evidence, such as it is, suggests (or at least allows for the possibility) that reflection is a mental operation that can be performed either voluntarily or non-voluntarily. When, for instance, Hume closes his eyes and thinks of the colors of the walls of his chamber, this reflection is performed voluntarily (see T 1.1.1.3: 8; SBN 3). But thinking about (of, on) something, that is, reflecting on something, need not be voluntary. For example, consider Hume's discussion of the association of ideas in the *First Enquiry*. Illustrating his claim that there are 'only three principles of connexion among ideas, namely, *Resemblance*, *Contiguity* in time or place, and *Cause or Effect*', Hume writes:

That these principles serve to connect ideas will not, I believe, be much doubted.

A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original. The mention of one apartment in a building naturally introduces an enquiry or discourse concerning the others. And if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forbear reflecting on the pain which follows it. (E 3.3: 101)

Besides the fact that the first case is an instance of resemblance, the second an instance of contiguity, and the third an instance of cause and effect, it is noteworthy that all three examples are reasonably read as instances of thoughts coming unbidden: when looking at a portrait, we can't help but think of the person depicted; when thinking of one apartment in a building, we can't help but think of the others; and when thinking of a wound, we can't help but think about the pain it causes. Indeed, in the latter case, the suggestion that 'reflecting' on the pain is involuntary is explicit, as something 'we can scarcely forbear'.¹⁵

The textual evidence to support the Reflection view is there in plain view, but also easy to miss because Hume does not go out of his way to emphasize it.

As a way of illustrating the distinction between the vivacity of an impression and the faintness of its corresponding idea, Hume writes:

A man, in a fit of anger, is actuated in a very different manner from the one who only thinks of that emotion. (E 2.2: 96 – underlining added)

This illustration of the general claim that emotions (which are secondary impressions) are more lively than ideas of emotions will not fulfill its purpose unless it is *presupposed* that

thinking of (or reflecting on) anger, whether voluntarily or non-voluntarily, involves the framing or production of an idea that represents that emotion. The Reflection view, unlike rival accounts of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas, readily explains the presupposition.

Hume's account of the nature of ideas is also revealing:

[I]mpressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above-mentioned. (E 2.3: 97 – underlining added)

In this passage, Hume again presupposes that (simple) ideas are formed by thinking of, or reflecting on, other (simple) perceptions, again with no commitment to whether the reflection is voluntary or non-voluntary.

We can see a similar presupposition at work in his explanation of how we come by the idea of God (this time, voluntarily):

The idea of God, as meaning *an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being*, arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and augmenting, without limit, those qualities of goodness and wisdom. (E 2.6: 97-98 – underlining added)

Here Hume claims that the idea of God is *complex*, but his account of how we form the ideas that are the simpler *elements* of that complex idea presupposes that they are produced by reflection. For example, although I do not form the complex idea of *God* by reflecting

on any perception, I form the simple (or, at least, simpler) ideas of goodness and wisdom by (presumably, voluntarily) reflecting on my own perceptions and operations, augmenting those ideas without limit, and then (again, voluntarily) combining them to form the idea of God.

In another passage, Hume discusses the effects of contiguity and resemblance in the enlivening of perceptions:

The thinking on any object readily transports the mind to what is contiguous...[E]ven at a distance the reflecting on any thing in the neighborhood of my friends or family naturally produces an idea of them. (E 5.17: 127-128 – underlining added)

Here Hume imagines a case in which reflection on an impression of something that is taken to be near one's family produces an idea of one's family. This happens in two steps. First, by reflecting on something that is contiguous to one's family, one forms the idea of the contiguous thing; second, the idea of the contiguous thing (by principles of association) leads the mind to conceive of that to which it is contiguous, namely one's own family. The first step in this account again *presupposes* that ideas that represent impressions are caused by reflection on those very impressions.

In an important passage, this time from the *Treatise*, Hume discusses how we form ideas that represent other *ideas*, rather than ideas that represent impressions:

Upon the same principles we need not be surpriz'd to hear of the remembrance of an idea; that is, of the idea of an idea, and of its force and vivacity superior to the loose conceptions of the imagination. In thinking of our past thoughts we not only delineate out the objects, of which we were thinking, but also conceive the action of the mind in the meditation...When the memory offers an idea of this, and represents it as past, 'tis easily conceiv'd how that idea may have more vigour and firmness, than when we think of a past thought, of which we have no remembrance.
(T 1.3.8.16: 74; SBN 106 – underlining added)

Here Hume just assumes that the way in which we form an idea of an idea is by *thinking of* the represented idea, before going on to point out that ideas of remembered ideas are more vivid than ideas of non-remembered ideas. This brings out the fact that Hume takes for granted that reflection is the process by which *all* (simple) ideas are formed, not just ideas that represent impressions, but also ideas that represent ideas.

For Hume, the fact that ideas are formed by reflecting on perceptions helps explain why the former are usually *representations* of the latter (with the idea of the missing shade of blue functioning as a notable exception).¹⁶ To *think of* something is to form a representation of it. It is therefore unsurprising to find Hume saying, in no fewer than ten places in the *Treatise*, that ideas represent the things (usually impressions) they are about (see, for example, (T 1.1.1.3: 8; SBN 3), (T 1.1.1.7: 9; SBN 4), (T 1.2.3.4: 27; SBN 34), (T 1.3.7.5: 67; SBN 96), (T 1.3.14.6: 106; SBN 157), and (T 2.1.11.8: 208; SBN 319)). The fact that ideas are representations of perceptions is therefore a natural consequence of

the fundamental, criterial property of ideas, namely, that they are formed by *thinking about* other perceptions.¹⁷

According to the Reflection view, Hume's criterion for distinguishing between impressions and ideas is *theoretical, operation-based, causal* and *backward-looking*. It is theoretical and operation-based inasmuch as it relies on a particular theory of the mind's activities. And it is causal and backward-looking because it takes the distinctive feature of (simple) ideas to be a function of how these perceptions come to be. For these reasons, it should be clear that the Reflection view does not collapse into any of the five interpretations of Hume's distinction criticized above.

Beyond being textually supported, the Reflection view actually *explains* why Hume says the things that have led many scholars to adopt the Force and Vivacity view. Thinking of a perception *distances* the perceiver from it. The distance that derives from the second-order perception of things explains why, in general, they do not possess the kind of psychic vehemence, intensity, and strength possessed by first-order perceptions, which are simply sensed or felt. When I feel hunger, I am pained and disposed to acquire something to eat. But when I think about my hunger and consider it as a desire for food, the intensity and strength of the perception I thereby acquire are diminished. This stands to reason, and appears empirically confirmable. So simple ideas are, in fact, as Hume tells us, *generally* or *naturally* weaker and fainter than simple impressions. This is not because their weakness and faintness is what *defines* them: it is because what defines them, namely the fact that they are the direct result of second-order perception, conduces to weakness and faintness. As Hume writes in the *Abstract* to the *Treatise*:

When we feel a passion or emotion of any kind, or have the images of external objects conveyed by our senses; the perception of the mind is what [the author] calls an *impression*,...[but when] we reflect on a passion or an object which is not present, this perception is an *idea*. *Impressions*, therefore, are our lively and strong perceptions; *ideas* are the fainter and weaker' (Abs. 5: 408; SBN 647—underlining added).

The point here, revealed by Hume's use of 'therefore', is that the fact that impressions are forceful and lively, along with the fact that ideas are faint and languid, is something that follows from, rather than being criterial of, the impression-idea distinction.

At the same time, we can understand why Hume accepts the existence of vivid ideas and weak impressions. For there are mechanisms for enlivening perceptions, and there are mechanisms for deadening them. By engaging our emotions, which are strong and vivid, poetry can enliven the weakest idea. And time, along with the absence of perceptual reinforcement, can weaken the strongest sensation or emotion.

Moreover, the Reflection view escapes all the criticisms leveled at the five previous views. Recall that the Force and Vivacity view cannot avoid the Problem of Extensional Inadequacy: however force and vivacity are defined, there will be impressions that are very faint and ideas that are very vivid. According to the Force and Vivacity view, faint impressions should be classified as ideas and vivid ideas should be classified as impressions. Not so on the Reflection view. If (simple) ideas are identified as those perceptions produced by reflecting on other perceptions, then it is consistent with their nature for them to be as faint or as vivid as one likes; and, for similar reasons, the same is

true of impressions. None of this, of course, impugns Hume's empirical generalization that ideas are naturally/generally faint while impressions are naturally/generally vivid.

The Causal Priority view and the Copy Principle view cannot make sense of the fact that Hume's argument for the Copy Principle relies on observation and experience: for the Causal Priority view entails that the causal aspect of the Copy Principle is simply built into the very account of what it is to be an idea, while the Copy Principle view builds the entirety of the Copy Principle into the latter account. Both views, then, presuppose, falsely, that Hume countenances the possibility of *a posteriori* necessities. But on the Reflection view, that ideas are caused by (or copy) impressions or impressions are caused (or copied) by ideas is not part of Hume's account of what it is to be an idea. Empirical observation could, for all we antecedently know, confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis that those perceptions that are *not* produced by reflecting on other perceptions cause or resemble perceptions that *are* produced by reflecting on other perceptions.

The Feeling/Thinking view supposes that impressions are those perceptions that are intuitively and pre-theoretically sorted as *felt*, while ideas are intuitively and pre-theoretically sorted as *thought*. By contrast, the Reflection view makes no such suppositions, and thus avoids the main counterintuitive consequence of the Feeling/Thinking view, namely its classification of hallucinations as impressions.

The Objective Realm view cannot accommodate Hume's scepticism or his classification of passions as impressions. But the same thing can't be said of the Reflection view, which does not build presupposition of the existence of an external world into the criterion by which to distinguish between impressions and ideas, and which does not entail that passions are not impressions. It is true, of course, that passions are impressions of

reflection, and so caused by reflecting on ideas that represent impressions of sensation (or by reflecting on the impressions of sensation themselves). But they (unlike the ideas that represent those ideas or impressions) are not produced as a direct result of the second-order act of treating them as intentional objects; they are caused by reflection only in the sense that reflection is temporally prior to, and constantly conjoined with, their appearance in the mind.

The Reflection view, then, is textually supported, consistent with the rest of Hume's system, and immune to the objections that afflict alternative views.

8. Conclusion

The criterion Hume uses to distinguish between impressions and ideas has been the subject of serious and extended debate. I have considered five interpretations of the nature of the distinction (the Force and Vivacity view, the Causal Priority view, the Copy Principle view, the Objective Realm view, and the Feeling/Thinking view), and found each of them wanting. I have proposed instead that Hume adopts the Reflection view, according to which simple ideas are those perceptions formed by reflecting on other perceptions. This criterion explains why simple ideas (with few exceptions) represent other perceptions and why simple ideas are generally and originally weaker and fainter than simple impressions, and it avoids the problems with the other five interpretations to boot. I conclude that the Reflection view makes the best sense of Hume's theory of impressions and ideas, taken as a whole.¹⁸

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FOOTNOTES

¹ All quotations are from *David Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, with text revised and notes by P. H. Nidditch, 2nd edition (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), and *David Hume: An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). Passages from the main text of the *Treatise* are cited in the form: (T Book.Part.Section.Paragraph: Page; SBN Page). Passages from the *Appendix* to the *Treatise* are cited in the form: (App. Paragraph: Page; SBN Page). Passages from the *Abstract* of the *Treatise* are cited in the form: (Abs. Paragraph: Page; SBN Page). Passages from the *Enquiry* are cited in the form: (E Section.Paragraph: Page).

² Among those who accept the Force and Vivacity view, we find Bennett (1971: 223-225; 2002: 97-99), Stroud (1977: 27), Wright (1983: 213), Craig (1986: 95-96), Everson (1988: 401-402), Waxman (1994: 27-29), Dicker (1998: 6), Noonan (1999: 60-62), Dauer (1999), Kamooneh (2003), Garrett (2008: 42-43), and Owen (2009: 72-73). Some of these authors also think that Hume draws the impression/idea distinction in other ways, ways that are not mutually compatible with the force-and-vivacity criterion.

Govier (1972) argues that Hume uses two sets of terms, a set of synonyms of ‘forceful’ (including ‘strong’, ‘vigorous’, ‘steady’, ‘solid’, and ‘firm’) and a set of synonyms of ‘vivacious’ (including ‘vivid’, ‘lively’, and ‘intense’), without realizing that

the two sets are not themselves synonymous with each other: ‘To say that an idea is forceful...is to say that it will influence or determine or affect subsequent ideas in certain specifiable ways’, but ‘to say that an impression is a vivid one is to say that it is detailed and explicit and that it delineates clearly various properties of its object’ (1972: 52). Govier suggests that it makes no sense, within Hume’s system, to count impressions as forceful, since ‘the forcefulness of an impression, x , can only be the forcefulness of that idea to which the impression x gives rise’. By contrast, she argues, ‘it makes considerable sense to distinguish impressions from ideas on the basis of their comparative vivacity’ (1972: 48).

All of these authors offer different accounts of Hume’s conception of the *nature* of force and vivacity. For our purposes, these differences do not matter, because all versions of the Force and Vivacity view (except, perhaps, Waxman’s—regarding which, see note 5) are vulnerable to the same kind of objection, the Problem of Extensional Inadequacy, described below.

³ Hume tells us that ‘[e]very chimera of the brain is as vivid and intense...sometimes as the present impressions of the senses’ (T 1.3.10.9: 84; SBN 123—see also E 2.1: 96). He claims that ‘the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination’ (T 1.1.3.1: 11; SBN 9), slipping easily into talk of ‘impressions of memory’ in several passages in the *Treatise* (see (T 1.3.4.1: 58; SBN 82), (T 1.3.5: 59; SBN 84), (T 1.3.9.7: 76; SBN 110), (T 1.3.16.6: 119; SBN 177-178)) and thereby suggesting that, in some cases, memory ideas are just about as vivid as normal everyday impressions. Hume also claims that a belief is ‘a lively idea related to a present impression’ (T 1.3.8.1: 69;

SBN 98), and that some beliefs are ideas of memory (T 1.3.5.7: 61; SBN 86) while others are ideas of imagination that can, in some cases, possess a ‘force and vigour’ that is ‘equal’ to that possessed by (lively) memory beliefs (T 1.3.5.6: 60-61; SBN 86).

⁴ Impressions are sometimes ‘so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas’ (T 1.1.1.1: 7; SBN 2), and ‘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: 181; SBN 276).

⁵ On Waxman’s version of the Force and Vivacity view, vivacity is interpreted as verisimilitude, which ‘is not, as so often is supposed, a quality of *the perceptions themselves*, but of our *consciousness* of them, an intentional *regarding-as-real*’ (1994: 33). Thus, on Waxman’s reading of Hume, a qualitatively faint sensation or a calm passion can still be vivid inasmuch as it is regarded as real, rather than fake or counterfeit. In this way, Waxman’s version of the Force and Vivacity view avoids some aspects of the Problem of Extensional Inadequacy. But two difficulties remain.

The first difficulty is that hallucinations, which on Hume’s account are regarded as real (even if they are not actually real), are ideas, not impressions. But on Waxman’s verisimilitude version of the Force and Vivacity view, hallucinations should count as forceful and vivid, and hence as impressions. Waxman might respond that the Force and Vivacity view applies only to impressions and ideas in their *original* mental manifestations, and not to perceptions that have been enlivened or deadened by various mechanisms (such as association) after their original appearance in the mind. But many hallucinations (such

as those produced by the ingestion of hallucinogens) are original productions that are not caused by any enlivening mechanism. So Waxman's verisimilitude version of the Force and Vivacity view cannot account for the ideational status of original hallucinations.

The second difficulty is that there is reason to think that Hume does not accept the verisimilitude account of vivacity. The problem arises from the fact that vivacity is scalar, while verisimilitude is not. For a perception to be verisimilar is for it to be regarded as real. But regarding something as real is not something that comes in degrees. Waxman tries to finesse the point, claiming that ideas of memory are regarded as less real, while ideas of imagination are regarded as not real (1994: 39). But regarding something as less real than something else is not the same as having a lesser degree of regarding it as real, and regarding something as not real is not the same as having no degree of regarding it as real, even if it were possible to have degrees of regard. So if vivacity does, but verisimilitude does not, come in degrees, then vivacity cannot be identical to verisimilitude.

⁶ Similar remarks apply to Hume's numerous statements to the effect that ideas can sometimes be as vivid as (ordinary) impressions, and impressions can sometimes be as faint as (ordinary) ideas (see, for example, the passages cited in notes 3 and 4).

I note here that Hume has strong theoretical reasons for making a metaphysical, rather than a mere epistemic, commitment here. For it is part of his science of the mind that certain mental phenomena can be explained as a result of the literal transmission of vivacity (and also the transmission of faintness) from perceptions to other perceptions. He sometimes describes this process as one of 'diffusion', and famously likens it to the conveyance of some (presumably liquid) substance 'as by so many pipes or canals' (T

1.3.10.7: 84; SBN 122). On this picture, when ideas become lively or impressions faint, this is because they literally acquire a greater or lesser degree of vivacity, as the case may be. So, for Hume, the epistemic truths about our categorization of perceptions as impressions or ideas are founded on metaphysical facts about those perceptions. (I thank an anonymous referee for suggesting that I clarify these remarks.)

⁷ See also Garrett (2008: 42-43).

⁸ A possible reply is that impressions should be identified as those perceptions that, in a causal chain of perceptions, are absolutely causally prior to all the others. But this suggestion won't accommodate secondary (reflective) impressions, which 'proceed from' (i.e., are caused by) other impressions, either meditately or immediately (T 2.1.1.1: 181; SBN 275). I thank an anonymous referee for comments that led me to needed clarification here, and in the main text.

⁹ This is the substance of Stroud's objection to the Temporal Priority view, which is part of the Causal Priority view (1977: 30-31).

¹⁰ I thank an anonymous referee for an objection that led me to articulate a different criticism of Landy's proposal.

¹¹ Note also that in a passage from the Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume writes that when a description of past circumstances 'touches the memory', 'the very same ideas [previously

considered as fictions] now appear in a new light, and have, in a manner, a different feeling from what they had before' [underlining added]. He goes on to say that the faculties of memory and imagination 'are only distinguish'd by the different *feeling* of the ideas they present' (T 1.3.5.4-5: 60; SBN 628). So Hume himself is not averse to describing ideas of memory, as well as ideas of imagination, as felt.

¹² I thank an anonymous referee for raising this objection.

¹³ Reflection is not the same as consciousness. Consciousness is awareness of a perception, the kind of awareness that provides us with knowledge of its intrinsic (qualitative and quantitative) features. As Hume writes: '[S]ince all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear' (T 1.4.2.7: 127; SBN 190). Given that it is impossible to think about a perception without being conscious of it, reflection involves consciousness. But consciousness does not involve or require reflection: it is possible to be aware of a perception without engaging in a second-order act of reflecting on it.

¹⁴ Thanks to Don Garrett for bringing this issue to my attention.

¹⁵ One should not be misled by the seemingly volition-laden connotations of the word 'reflection' into thinking that Hume necessarily conceives of reflection as a voluntary act. To the best of my knowledge, he does not ever require that reflection *must* be voluntary, and there is at least some reason (described in the main text) to believe that reflection *can*

be non-voluntary. These reasons, together with the fact that Hume often countenances involuntary mental acts of considerable sophistication (e.g., the case of a man hung in a cage above a precipice who involuntarily trembles in part because he involuntarily thinks of falling (T 1.3.13.10: 100-101; SBN 148-149), as well as cases of unbidden memories and mental associations), suggest that the burden of proof is on those who would claim that the mental act of reflection *must*, for Hume, be voluntary. (I thank an anonymous referee for raising this concern.)

The fact that reflection can be performed non-voluntarily explains why Hume's theory can make sense of (non-human) animals having ideas. As I read Hume, the fact that dogs think about their (simple) perceptions is not something that is responsive to their will. Rather, dogs automatically (non-voluntarily) think about their (simple) perceptions, thereby forming ideas of those perceptions, whenever they have them. Admittedly, second-order mental acts are indications of a sophisticated mind. But Hume's numerous forays into the complexity of (non-human) animal psychology strongly suggest that he sees sophistication where others, such as Descartes, see little or none (see (T 1.3.16: 118-120; SBN 176-179), (T 2.1.12: 211-213; SBN 324-328), and (T 2.2.12: 255-256; SBN 397-398)).

¹⁶ The idea of the missing shade of blue (call this idea, 'B') is formed by reflection on a number of impressions of shades of blue (not involving an impression of the missing shade) arranged in a series. So B is not a counterexample to the Reflection view, according to which simple ideas are perceptions that are directly produced by reflection on other perceptions. But unlike most other simple ideas, B does not *represent* the impressions

from which it is directly derived by reflection. Although it resembles each of the impressions in the relevant series to some degree or other, B does not resemble any of them sufficiently to count as representing it.

¹⁷ Hume clearly holds that passions and emotions do not represent (T 2.3.3.5: 266; SBN 415), and it is likely that this thesis holds for all secondary (reflective) impressions. But there is a lively debate about whether, for Hume, impressions of sensation represent objects or qualities external to the mind. (For arguments that they do, see Garrett (2006). For a contrary position, see Cohen and Owen (1997).) Proponents of the Reflection view need not take a position in this debate, for the converse of the claim that direct reflection on X is sufficient for representation of X need not be true. So, from the fact that impressions are not directly formed by reflection on other perceptions (as the Reflection view holds), it does not follow that impressions do not (or cannot) represent. Nor, of course, does it follow that impressions do (or can) represent.

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