

Hume's Central Principles

*2. Overview,
Hume's Theory of Ideas,
and his Faculty Psychology*

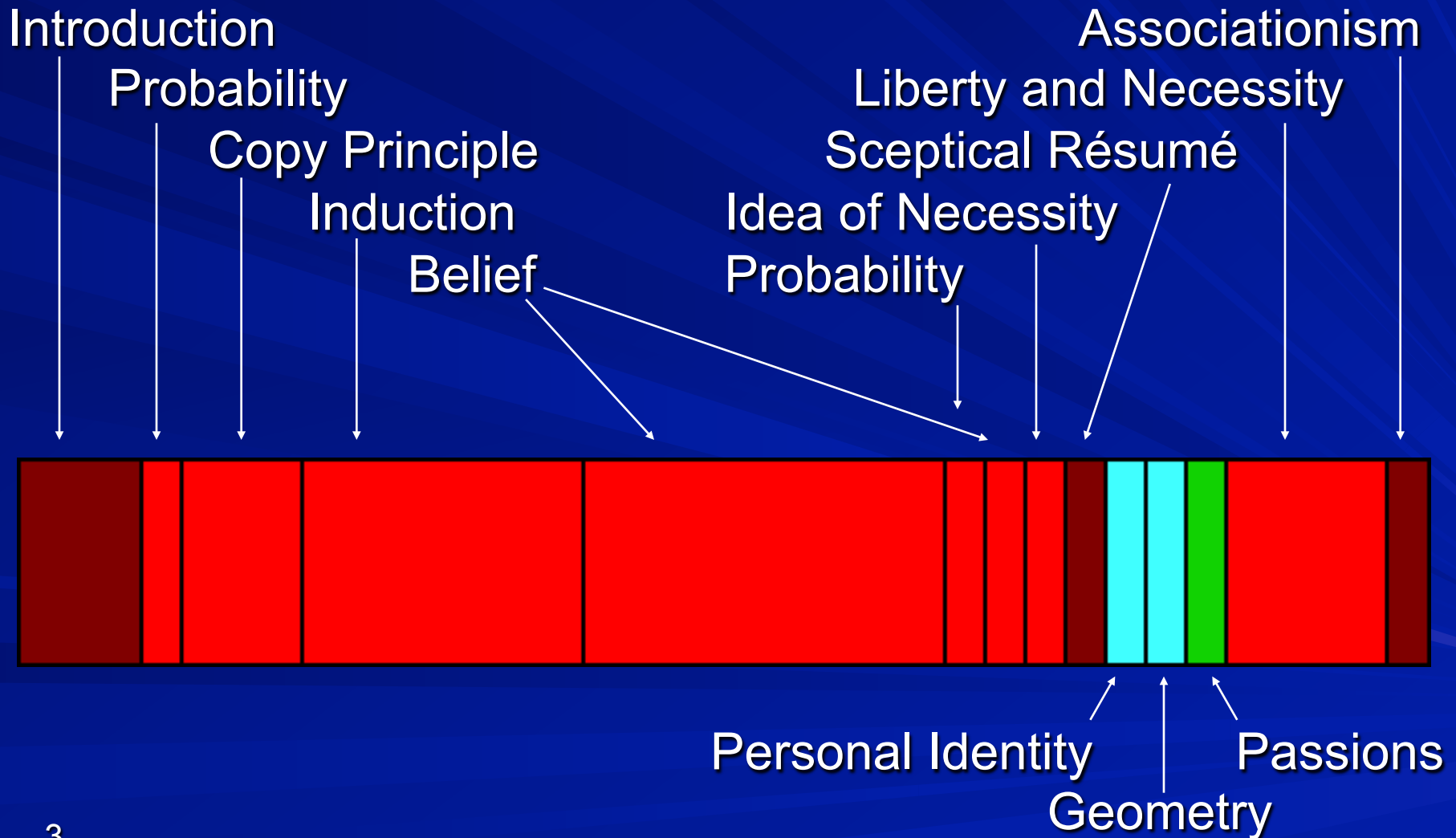


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An Integrated Vision

- We have seen how Hume's investigation of the notion of causation brought together his interest in the *Cosmological Argument for God's existence*, *free will* and the *Problem of Evil*, his opposition to aprioristic metaphysics (e.g. concerning *mind and matter*), and his view of *human beings as part of the natural world*, amenable to empirical investigation.
- Although there is historical evidence of his early interest in these things, they come together most clearly not in the *Treatise* itself (January 1739), but in the *Abstract* (autumn 1739) and the *Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* (1748) ...

The Topics of the *Abstract*



Overview (1)

- Starts from a theory of mental contents: *impressions* (sensations or feelings) and *ideas* (thoughts).
- Empiricist: *all ideas are derived from impressions* (and hence from experience) – Hume's Copy Principle.
- Assumes a theory of *faculties* (reason, the senses, imagination etc.), in terms of which he expresses many of his main results.

Overview (2)

- Aims to deny that we have *rational insight* into things (and also – in his moral theory - that we are governed by *reason*).
- Relations of ideas / matters of fact
 - roughly analytic / synthetic
(*but in the Treatise based on a theory of different kinds of relation*)
- Demonstrative / probable reasoning
 - roughly deductive / inductive

Overview (3)

- Induction presupposes an assumption of uniformity over time, which cannot be founded on any form of rational evidence.
- Instead, induction is founded on “custom”, an instinctive extrapolation from observed to unobserved.
- When we find ourselves making customary inferences, we ascribe necessity (and hence causation) to the objects concerned.

Overview (4)

- Customary inferences provide our only impression of necessary connexion: there is no other possible impression source.
- So that is where our idea of necessity is copied from, and we can have no other understanding of necessity.
- Customary inference is as applicable to the human as to the physical world. Hence this must involve the same idea of necessity.

Overview (5)

- “*a priori*, any thing may produce any thing”
- “all objects, which are found to be constantly conjoined, are upon that account only to be regarded as causes and effects .”
(*T* 1.4.5.30-2)
- This empirical, causal, deterministic science involves systematic searching for underlying correlations, “reducing principles ... to a greater simplicity”. (*E* 4.12)

2(a)

The Theory of Ideas

A
T R E A T I S E
O F
Human Nature :
B E I N G
An ATTEMPT to introduce the ex-
perimental Method of Reasoning
I N T O
M O R A L S U B J E C T S.

*Rara temporum felicitas, ubi sentire, quæ velis ; & quæ
sentias, dicere licet.*
TACIT.

V O L. I.

O F T H E
U N D E R S T A N D I N G.

L O N D O N :

Printed for JOHN NOON, at the *White-Hart*, near
Marcet's-Chapel, in *Cheapside*.

M D C C X X X I X.

1739

What is an “Idea”?

- John Locke’s *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) defines an *idea* as “whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks” (I i 8).
- This is supposed to include all types of “thinking”, including perception and feeling as well as contemplation. So our *ideas* include thoughts and sensations, and also “internal” ideas such as feelings.

Ideas and Impressions

- Hume thinks Locke's usage is too broad, so he adopts different terminology:
 - An *impression* is a *sensation* (e.g. from seeing a blue sky or smelling a flower) or a *feeling* (e.g. being angry, or feeling pain);
 - An *idea* is a *thought* (e.g. about the sky, or about a pain, or about the existence of God);
 - A *perception* is either an *impression* or an *idea*. (So Hume uses the word *perception* to cover everything that Locke calls an *idea*.)

Sensation and Reflection

“Impressions [are of] two kinds, those of *sensation*, and those of *reflection*.” (T 1.1.2.1)

- Some impressions come directly from sensation (e.g. colours, smells, pains).
- Other impressions arise only from things that we think or reflect about (e.g. thinking about pain can make us feel fear; thinking about someone else's good luck can make us envious). These are *impressions of reflection*, which at T 1.1.6.1 Hume says are either *passions* (e.g. the desire for something) or *emotions* (e.g. happiness).

Force and Vivacity

- Hume says that impressions have more *force, vivacity, or liveliness* than ideas:

“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 force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the soul, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those ... which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions* ...” (*T* 1.1.1.1).

An Inconsistency?

- But Hume hints that sometimes a thought can in fact be as lively as a sensation:

“in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: [And] it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas.” (*T* 1.1.1.1)

- Compare, for example, dreaming of an attack of spiders, with watching paint dry!

Feeling and Thinking

- Hume's distinction is most easily understood as that between *feeling* and *thinking*:
“I believe it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction. Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking.” (*T* 1.1.1.1)
- So then impressions (and ideas) are not defined as being our more (and less) vivacious perceptions.

The “Liberty of the Imagination”

- Some of our ideas can be divided up imaginatively into components:

An apple has a particular shape, a colour, a taste, a smell ... Its shape is also complex ...

- We can put ideas together in new ways:

gold + mountain = golden mountain;

banapple = shape of banana + taste of apple.

- See *T* 1.1.3.4 on this “second principle”. At *T* 1.1.7.3 it seems to turn into the far stronger (and questionable) Separability Principle.

Simple and Complex Ideas

- At *Treatise* 1.1.1.2, Hume divides all ideas and impressions into simple and complex:
“Simple perceptions or impressions and ideas are such as admit of no distinction nor separation. The complex are the contrary to these, and may be distinguished into parts.”
- In the *Enquiry*, Hume only hints at this distinction (at 2.6 and 7.4) – perhaps he is doubtful whether every idea is absolutely simple or complex?

The Origin of Ideas

- Book I of John Locke's *Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1690) argues against “innate” ideas and principles.
- Book II then aims to explain how all our various ideas can arise from experience.
- So Locke is an *empiricist* about ideas.
- Descartes and other *rationalists* claimed that we have innate ideas (e.g. of God, or of extension), yielding a priori knowledge.

The Copy Principle

- Hume's version of Locke's empiricism is expressed in what is commonly known as his Copy Principle:

“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)

- Although *Enquiry* 2.9 presents this as a weapon against *bogus* ideas, Hume actually uses it almost exclusively to *clarify* ideas, by tracing them to their impression-source.

Problems with the Copy Principle

- Hume's arguments for the Principle seem rather weak:
 - The first (*T* 1.1.1.5) just asserts that there are no counter-examples – but his opponent will deny this!
 - The second (*T* 1.1.1.9) claims that people without particular senses cannot have corresponding ideas: plausible, no doubt, but *how can he prove it?*
 - The missing shade of blue (*T* 1.1.1.10) is at least an awkward complication.
 - Overall, one gets the impression that Hume takes idea-empiricism somewhat uncritically for granted.

The Theory of Ideas

- The central assumption of the Theory of Ideas is that thinking consists in having “ideas” (in Locke’s sense) or “perceptions” (in Hume’s sense) before the mind, and that different sorts of thinking are to be distinguished in terms of the different sorts of perceptions which they involve.
- This approach makes the mind very passive – its only activity seems to be to *perceive* impressions and ideas ...

The Mental Stage

- The mind is seen as like a stage, on which “perceptions” are the actors:
 - *seeing* a tree involves having an *impression* of a tree “in front of the mind”;
 - *thinking* of a tree involves having an *idea* of a tree in front of the mind;
 - *feeling* a pain involves having an *impression* of a pain;
 - *thinking* about a pain involves having an *idea* of a pain.

The Copy Principle and Imagism

- If ideas are copies of impressions, then Hume must take our ideas to be something like mental images (not necessarily visual).
- This crude assimilation of thinking to the having of mental images seriously infects some of Hume's philosophy, for example:
 - His discussions of mental Separability (treating it as rather like manipulating a raster image).
 - His impoverished view of the faculty of *reflection*, which ought to encompass awareness not only of feelings and desires, but also of mental activity such as *doubting*, *reasoning*, and *inferring*.

Hume on the Association of Ideas

- Despite “the liberty of the imagination”, there is a pattern to our thoughts:

“all simple ideas may be separated by the imagination, and may be united again in what form it pleases ... [yet there is] some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another” (*T* 1.1.4.1)

- Ideas may be associated in three ways:

“The qualities, from which this association arises ... are three, *viz.* RESEMBLANCE, CONTIGUITY in time or place, and CAUSE and EFFECT.” (*T* 1.1.4.2)

Locke on the Association of Ideas

- Hume will appeal to the association of ideas with great enthusiasm, but Locke's attitude to it had been far less positive:

“[3] this sort of Madness ... [4] this ... Weakness to which all Men are ... liable, ... a Taint which ... universally infects Mankind ... [5] ... there is [a] Connexion of *Ideas* wholly owing to Chance or Custom; *Ideas* that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds that 'tis very hard to separate them ...”

(*Essay II xxxiii 3-5*)

2(b)

Hume's
Faculty
Psychology

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Humean Faculties

- At *T* 1.1.2, Hume distinguishes between impressions of *sensation* and *reflection*.
- At *T* 1.1.3, he distinguishes between ideas of the *memory* and *imagination*.
- Talk of mental faculties (*reason*, *senses*, *imagination* etc.) will continue to play a major role in the Treatise. Indeed some of Hume's most important and famous results are expressed in these terms ...

Faculties, Induction, and Body

- “... the next question is, whether experience produces the idea by means of the *understanding* or *imagination*; whether we are determined by *reason* to make the transition, or by ... association ... of perceptions.” (T 1.3.6.4)
- “The subject, then, of our present enquiry, is concerning the *causes* which induce us to believe in the existence of body: ... we ... shall consider, whether it be *the senses*, *reason*, or the *imagination*, that produces the opinion of a *continu’d* or of a *distinct* existence.” (T 1.4.2.2)

Faculties and Morality

- “... we need only consider, whether it be possible, from **reason** alone, to distinguish betwixt moral good and evil, or whether there must concur some other principles to enable us to make that distinction.” (*T* 3.1.1.3-4)
- “There has been a controversy started of late ... concerning the general foundation of MORALS; whether they be derived from **reason**, or from **SENTIMENT** ...” (*M* 1.3)

Faculties in the *Treatise* (1)

- *The (external) Senses*

Present impressions to the mind (thus creating ideas which copy them).

- *Reflection*

An *internal sense*, by which we inwardly sense our own mental state.

- *Memory*

Replays ideas vivaciously, reflecting their original order.

Faculties in the *Treatise* (2)

- *Imagination (or the Fancy)*

Replays ideas less vivaciously, with freedom to transpose and mix them.

- *Reason (or the Understanding)*

The overall cognitive faculty: discovers and judges truth and falsehood.

- *Will*

The conative faculty: forms intentions in response to desires and passions.

Hutcheson on the Faculties

“Writers on these Subjects should remember the common Division of the Faculties of the Soul. That there is 1. Reason presenting the natures and relations of things, antecedently to any Act of Will or Desire: 2. The Will, or *Appetitus Rationalis*, or the disposition of Soul to pursue what is presented as good, and to shun Evil. ... Below these [the Antients] place two other powers dependent on the Body, the Sensus, and the *Appetitus Sensitivus*, in which they place the particular Passions: the former answers to the Understanding, and the latter to the Will.”

Illustrations upon the Moral Sense (1742), SB §450

Hume on Reason and Understanding

- Hume, like Hutcheson, implicitly identifies Reason with “the understanding”, e.g.:

“When the mind [makes an inductive inference] 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*, ...”

(*T* 1.3.6.12)

- See also *T* 1.3.6.4, 1.4.1.1, 1.4.2.46, 1.4.2.57, 1.4.7.7, and compare 2.2.7.6 n. with 1.3.9.19 n.

Hume on Reason as Cognition

- “Reason is the discovery of truth or falshood.” (*T* 3.1.1.9)
- “That Faculty, by which we discern Truth and Falshood ... the Understanding” (*E* 1.14, note in 1748/1750 editions)
- “... reason, in a strict sense, as meaning the judgment of truth and falsehood ...” (*DOP* 5.1)
- See also *T* 2.3.3.3, 2.3.3.5-6, 2.3.3.8, 2.3.10.6, 3.1.1.4, 3.1.1.19 n. 69, 3.1.1.25-27, 3.2.2.20, *M* 1.7, *M App* 1.6, 1.21.

Distinguishing Between Faculties

- imagination/reason (*T* 1.4.2.2); imagination/memory (*T* 1.3.5); imagination/the senses (*T* 1.4.2.2); imagination/passions (*T* 2.2.2.16).
- reason/memory (*T* 3.3.4.13); reason/the senses (*T* 1.4.2.2); reason/the will (*T* 2.3.3.4).
- memory/the senses (*T* 1.1.2.1).
- Hume *never* distinguishes between “reason” and “the understanding”, or between either of these and “the judgment”. And he insists that our “intellectual faculty” is undivided (*T* 1.3.7.5 n.20).

Locke's Scepticism about Faculties

- Locke ridicules the language of faculties as a source of philosophical error, and declares himself inclined to forego it completely were it not that faculty words are so much in fashion that “It looks like too much affectation wholly to lay them by” (*Essay* II xxi 17-20).
- When we refer to man’s “understanding”, all we can properly mean is that man has a power to understand.
- It is a serious mistake to speak of our faculties “as so many distinct Agents”.
- Hume makes similar dismissive remarks about “occult” faculty language (*T* 1.4.3.10, *D* 4.12).