

The Empiricists // Spring 2016

Handout 15

Hume: Basic psychological framework

ON THE RELATION BETWEEN LOCKE, BERKELEY, AND HUME. At the risk of appearing superficial, it is, I think, useful still to keep track of the fundamental differences between the three figures, at least in the areas discussed here. Locke's ontology includes ideas and matter. Some ideas represent material qualities. In the main outline, then, Locke is faithful to the Cartesian dualism. Berkeley, as we have seen, only admits spirits and ideas. Well, Hume, as we shall hopefully see, only admits ideas. It is for this reason in part that Hume's *theoretical* philosophy may be seen as resting on a Berkeleyan foundation: it incorporates much of its critical strategy, but dismisses the positive solutions that require God, my spirit, and possibly other finite spirits to do much of the explanatory work. Hume's *practical* philosophy is, I think, wholly original and certainly owes no debt to Berkeley.

METHOD. Hume begins with a statement of method. The ancients, he complains, did not undertake a proper study of human nature. They merely codified common sense—that is, the prevalent opinions of their age. But another possibility exists whereby we begin with empirical propositions and draw logical conclusions from them. Significantly, Hume mentions Bacon, the presumed founder of the empirical method in natural science. (Elsewhere he praises Galileo as well.) Just as the experimental method was adopted in natural sciences, so can it be pursued in the science of human nature. TA 1

Remark 1. The discussion of method is helpfully abridged in the Abstract.

Remark 2. It is somewhat unclear what the 'science of human nature', or the 'science of man', is supposed to be. Provisionally at least we can understand it as an enquiry into human psychology that would yield theoretical implications for epistemology and, more remotely still, for metaphysics.

PERCEPTIONS. We recall that Locke used the term 'idea' to designate any content of the mind. In that he bundled together—arbitrarily it seems—feelings, mental images, and concepts. He distinguished between ideas of reflection and ideas of sensation, but this does not diminish the oddity in the use of 'idea'.

Now Hume offers us a slightly more refined inventory: impressions and ideas. Together they are grouped under the heading of 'perceptions'. Their distinction is said to be the degree of force and vivacity. On the other hand, impressions are said to comprise sensations, passions, and feelings, while ideas are 'images' of impressions in thinking. Hume concludes that the distinction corresponds to that between feeling and thinking. T 1.1.1.1

The last claim is potentially misleading. A modern philosopher reared in Kant and Frege might celebrate Hume's distinction as a distinction between mental imagery and thought, between psychological facts and propositional contents. Such a reading would be anachronistic.

Example 3. 'I am thinking about a cheesecake—though no cheesecake is present to my senses': what is the content of this assertion? Hume parses it thus: I entertain the idea of a cheesecake. It is less vivid than the impression of the cheesecake which I get while examining the cheesecake in Starbucks. Thus 'to think about *X*' is assimilated to 'to have an idea of *X* in your mind', 'calling up an idea of *X* in your mind', and ultimately 'to imagine *X*'.

Impressions of sensation are those contents of the mind when the relevant senses are active. Ideas of sensation are those contents when 'thinking' and 'reflection' are engaged. (These terms, I believe, should simply cover memory and imagination.) If, however, the only criterion for distinguishing between ideas and impressions is their relative vivacity, then it is possible that an exceptionally vivid idea—what we should classify as an idea—would be an impression. T 1.1.1.3

Example 4. Suppose I come to Starbucks in no mood for food. When I glance over a cheesecake, it does not strike me as very attractive. I have an impression of that cheesecake, but my impression, shall we say, is rather dim. Later on, when I get hungry in my car, I recall the image of that cheesecake—i.e. I have an idea of that cheesecake. But now I examine it in my mind in minute detail. It attracts me a great deal. Its white colour is unusually bright. If these are the facts, nothing prevents us from concluding that in the shop I in fact had an idea of the cheesecake, and in the car I had its impression.

Remark 5. Hume seems to be aware of this difficulty at the end of T 1.1.1.1.

At this stage we have to mention another distinction: impressions of reflection and ideas of reflection. Sensation being excluded, we now deal with impressions and ideas of 'passions and emotions'.

Example 6. Suppose I get angry when losing a chess game. Then I am said to have an impression of anger. Later on I recall my anger. Then I have an idea of my earlier anger.

LIMITATIONS. Hume leaves to natural scientists the investigation into the causes of our perceptions. So perhaps on the strength of these remarks we might read him as a naturalist and a physicalist about the mind. Yet, at the same time, he does mention the 'unknown causes' of our perceptions. This *may* refer to the impossibility of a natural explanation of how physical processes can generate mental states. It is unclear whether the impossibility is technical or metaphysical. T 2.1.1.1
T 1.1.1.1

INNATE IDEAS. In a move similar to Locke's, Hume introduces a distinction between simple and complex perceptions. It is somewhat unclear just what simplicity is supposed to consist in. But in any case, Hume believes he has resolved more adequately than Locke the problem of innate ideas. The solution is supposed to rest on the following claim: T 1.1.1.2

Copy Principle Every idea necessarily has an antecedent impression.