

Hume's psychology: the principles of association, imagination and belief

THE PRINCIPLES OF ASSOCIATION

How does the mind work? Hume claims that there are three types of regularity that hold between perceptions. While impressions (merely) exhibit these regularities, it is on the basis of these regularities that our ideas pass through our minds in the sequences that they do.

The three regularities are

1. *resemblance*, e.g. moving from an impression of a picture, e.g. of a dog, to the thought of the pictured object, the dog;
2. *contiguity* in time and space, e.g. moving from the thought of an event, the Moon landing, to something else that happened at the same time, the presidency of John F Kennedy;
3. *cause and effect*, e.g. moving from the thought of a wound to thinking of pain.

It may seem implausible that just these three relations govern all transitions of thought. Hume discusses this at greater length in the *Treatise*, where he emphasises that we must explore the 'full extent' of the relations to see that they hold. Two apparently unconnected ideas will always, he claims, be linked by a third idea which is connected by a principle to both. He also develops the principle of cause and effect: for the ideas of A and B to be linked by this principle, it needn't be that A is the cause of B or vice-versa. Rather, they simply need to be connected by causation, e.g. I might think of a cousin and then of another relation. The two are causally linked, by genetic ties, without one being a cause or effect of the other. Again, the object of the first idea need not be a cause of object of the second, but may only cause some action or movement in it; or need only have the power to do so. So we might move from the idea of a judge to that of a criminal.

Hume presents his theory as an empirical discovery. Are there any other regularities? We must look and see, but he claims he cannot find any and that a consideration of literature and historical narrative support him. If we look at how these works are organized, we see that the events narrated form a kind of unity, and to create this unity, authors use the three types of connection listed.

We might, however, suggest an amendment to Hume's view. Hume intended these relations to hold between ideas in virtue of what they are about. But Sigmund Freud suggested that ideas could be connected through their emotional significance. Hence one idea, which is accompanied by a certain emotion, might be followed by another, accompanied by the same emotion; and this is all the two ideas have in common.

We can also make a more radical objection: Hume has not included logical relations among his principles. But surely trains of thought can and do follow logical inferences.

Of course, this will involve resemblance, but we can argue that resemblance doesn't capture the real relation between the thoughts.

The three principles are, according to Hume, natural functions of the mind. We do not intend to connect ideas in this way; this is just how the mind works. They are the foundation of thought. Without them, our ideas would remain isolated, unconnected, and we could not think about experience and reality at all. Hume ascribes a particularly important role to the principle of cause and effect.

Finally, though he mentions it only briefly in §III, the regularities also account for complex ideas and for the overlaps between concepts in different languages: 'Among the different languages...it is found, that the words, expressive of ideas, the most compounded, do yet nearly correspond to each other: a certain proof that the simple ideas, comprehended in the compound ones, were bound together by some universal principle' (23).

THE PRINCIPLES OF ASSOCIATION AND THE SELF

Hume argues that the self is nothing more than a 'bundle' of thoughts and experiences. So what is it that ties a particular set of experiences into the particular bundle that constitutes a self?

Hume appeals to the principles of association: the many thoughts and perceptions are related to each other by resemblance, e.g. a memory resembles the original perception of which it is a memory, and causation – impressions cause corresponding ideas, experiences cause memories, beliefs cause other beliefs, and so on. This provides a further explanation of how we have confused similarity for identity. It is because of these many links of causation and resemblance that we think of the self as an 'identity'. The imagination replaces our experience of them with an fictitious idea of something continuous and uninterrupted.

Hume's theory suggests a strange result: intuitively, we think that I might have had a quite different set of experiences from the set I have had. But if I just am a set of experiences, this isn't true! Hume could respond that this is a matter of degree. Because the self has many experiences, if just some of these were different, that would not be enough to make for a different self. So I can still be the same person, even if some of my experiences were different. But I wouldn't be the same person if a great deal of my thoughts and experiences, beliefs, desires, emotions, etc. were different.

But this then leads to an even stranger result: many of your thoughts and experiences are related both causally and by resemblance to mine. For example, I say what I think, you then think what I was thinking. Are you now partly me? It doesn't seem quite right just to say that the only difference between two selves is the sheer number of these relations between mental states. Instead, we might want to say that some relations of cause and resemblance constitutive of personal identity and not others. But Hume can't say this. We can't say that the relevant types of relations of causation and resemblance link together the mental states of the same person but not the mental states of different people, because this presupposes the idea of the 'same person'. But that is just the idea that we are trying to analyse – so where did that idea come from?

IMAGINATION

Hume has an ‘imagistic’ theory of thought – he thinks that thought uses images, derived from impressions. He therefore thinks of the imagination as working with images – but this covers all thought.

What makes the imagination important for Hume is that it connects up ideas, according to the principles of association: ‘When the mind...passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another it is not determined by reason, but by certain principles which associate together the ideas of these objects and unite them in the imagination’ (*Treatise*, I.iii.vi).

All three principles involve a movement to an idea, for which the impression is not usually present to the senses. When your mind moves from looking at a picture to thinking of the person in the picture (resemblance), that person isn’t (usually) present, so you have an idea in mind of something not present to the senses. Again, when you move around a house, and your mind anticipates what is around the corner (contiguity) – this isn’t yet something you can see. And when you experience some event and infer its cause, the cause itself is not something you are experiencing.

And so the imagination plays a crucial role in Hume’s philosophy. The function of the imagination is not just ‘imaginative’ – creating scenarios and ideas which are not real. The imagination is the foundation of everything that is believed to real as well.

So how do we distinguish between what we ‘imagine’ and what we think is real? We’ll look at this next.

BELIEF

In Chapter V, Part 2, Hume raises and answers the question of how we distinguish between ‘fiction’ and belief. His claim is that a belief is an idea that is particularly forceful and vivid: ‘belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain’ (p. 125). The same quality that distinguished impressions from ideas also distinguishes beliefs from ideas of memory and imagination.

We can imagine whatever we want; but we cannot believe whatever we want. Forming a belief is not under our control. Hume’s account of belief in terms of vivacity explains this. Suppose I have an impression of the senses. My mind is immediately led to form the correlative idea, the ‘copy’. Because of the close and immediate connection to a current impression, the idea gains much of the vivacity of the impression, and so I have a particularly forceful and lively idea – a belief. But when I imagine seeing something, my idea does not rely on an impression, so it cannot have the same vivacity.

The general principle here is that vivacity is transmitted from one perception to another by the principles of association. A copy of an impression both resembles the impression and is caused by it. When I look at a photo, I form an idea of the photo and then an idea of the person in the photo. I believe the person whose photo it is exists as a cause of the photo. The vivacity of the impression of the photo is transmitted to the idea of the person, so I believe the person exists. Or again, if I see a billiard ball strike another, I can imagine that the first ball will simply stop dead upon contact. But this doesn’t have the

same vivacity as my belief that the second ball will move away. This is because my belief is the effect of past impressions, while the imagined alternative is not.

THE ROLE OF CAUSE-EFFECT

Where the relation of regularity between one perception and the next is cause-effect, vivacity can be transmitted so as to form beliefs (and this distinguishes belief from imagination). This is not so with resemblance and contiguity, because they link a perception to many different perceptions, which means that the 'vivacity' is dissipated, each connected perception only getting a small share of the original vivacity (*Treatise* I.iii.viii). But cause-effect connects a perception to just one other (the idea of the cause or effect of what is being thought about or experienced), and so that one perception receives all the vivacity of the first.

Is this right? Do we never form beliefs on the basis of just resemblance and contiguity? Again, my thoughts turn from the photo to the person (resemblance) and form a belief; when I am near home, I think of it (contiguity), and form a belief.

But note that from the photo, I don't form the belief that the person is present, as the photo is present; from being close to home, I don't form the belief that home is here, because it is near to here. Rather I believe that the person and home exist, that they are real, not fictitious, as objects standing in relations of resemblance and contiguity to my thoughts.

But these beliefs about what is real are not formed by resemblance or contiguity alone. They depend on cause-effect. Our thoughts would not move from the photo to the person or from being near to home to home itself, Hume argues, unless we already have the beliefs that the person and home exist. And these beliefs were formed by cause-effect – the ideas of the friend and home being caused by the relevant impressions, or by ideas that are related as cause or effect to ideas caused by impressions.

To summarise: a belief is an idea that has a greater vivacity than the imagination can achieve. The source of this vivacity depends on two things: at some point, being derived from impressions, and not just by any principle of association, but by cause-effect. A belief may itself be caused by impressions, or it may be the idea of a cause or effect of what we have experienced. Resemblance and contiguity can add to the vivacity of a belief, but cannot create a belief out of an idea on their own. Whether or not his account of vivacity is right, this relation of belief to impressions and the role of cause-effect deserves serious consideration and illustrates Hume's empiricism.

VIVACITY, BELIEF AND REASON

Hume's theory of 'vivacity' is highly problematic, and no longer taken seriously. He is trying to place on the single scale of vivacity all the differences between impressions, memories, ideas and beliefs. At one end, impressions, then beliefs, memories, imagination and other ideas.

1. Is this scale even correct? Don't some daydreams have more vivacity than memories or abstract beliefs?
2. Do beliefs and memories have similar amounts of vivacity? But how do we draw these boundaries? Hume can't say.

3. Is it right to say that a memory could be turned into a belief or even an impression by a further increase in vivacity? Surely not. Memories and impressions are logically different kinds of mental state from belief. For example, a belief about the future can't become a memory of the future with an increase in vivacity! Nor can a belief become an impression, because an impression is given immediately by a particular sensory modality.
4. The idea of vivacity is linked to energy and force. Yet we have no clear conception of a distinct 'mental energy'. Is vivacity linked to neurophysiological energy? We have no evidence to suggest so. We must reject the theory as, at best, metaphorical.

Hume's claim that beliefs, unlike fictions of the imagination, relate to impressions and cause-effect, also faces an objection. We normally take our beliefs to be a cognitive response to evidence. If the evidence gives us good reasons for a particular belief, we form that belief. Hume rejects this, as we saw in the quote above: 'When the mind...passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another it is not determined by reason' (*Treatise*, I.iii.vi), but by the principles of association. His theory has the consequence that we do not form beliefs on the basis of the reasons that justify them. Coming to have a belief is not a rational process.

Part of Hume's argument is that the formation of belief cannot be controlled by the will. This seems right; we cannot believe at will. (And this is a far better way of distinguishing belief from fiction!) But it doesn't follow, as Hume thinks, that beliefs are merely caused by non-rational factors (vivacity). What is missing is the idea of judgment, weighing up whether the evidence provides sufficient reason to believe. This process is not directly under the control of the will (although it has some element of agency – judging is something we do) and it is rationally directed.

IMAGINATION AGAIN

Having drawn the contrast with belief, we can say that there are two senses of 'imagination' in Hume. In the 'narrow' sense, imagination contrasts with belief. In the 'broad' sense, imagination includes and supports belief, because the principles of association, including cause-effect, that lead to the creation of belief are principles of the imagination. With this picture of the mind, Hume draws some startling conclusions about the basis of our knowledge, viz. that very little is secured by reason and almost all is secured by the imagination. It is difficult to appreciate the importance of the imagination, and how it functions, until we have seen its role in his theory of knowledge.