

## SENSING THE UNDERSTANDING IN HUME'S *TREATISE*

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In his *Treatise of Human Nature*, David Hume attempts to develop a "science of man" which, according to the title page, constitutes his "attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects". The scientific method Hume has in mind is what we have come to call *empiricism*, according to which "all of our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent" (T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4). The aim of early empiricism was to find a way to do without the kind of innate ideas posited by rationalist philosophers in the wake of Descartes. For empiricist philosophers like Hume the existence of innate ideas had been "refuted" by Locke and was considered "almost universally rejected in the learned world" (T 1.3.14.6; SBN 158). If there are no innate ideas, then, the implication is that all of our mental content ("ideas") is constituted by representations ("copies") of sensory feelings ("impressions") or complex combinations of these representations either naturally united or artificially constructed by the imagination. Thus Hume develops his distinctive experimental method: for any idea we claim to have, we ought to be able to resolve it into its component simple ideas and trace each of these back to their original impressions.

The empiricist method makes most sense with reference to our everyday ideas like "apple", "red", "pain", "table", "triangle", and even "Paris".<sup>1</sup> But this method seems problematic for some of our more philosophical ideas. If every idea must have a preceding impression, what impressions could possibly be the source of our ideas of things like "substance" and "causation"? In fact, that's exactly the point. Hume thinks philosophy has led us to posit all sorts of ideas we don't really have, and hence many of our philosophical terms have no associated mental content.

So whenever he is suspicious of an idea as being merely an empty philosophical fiction, he applies his empiricist method and attempts to locate the original impression from which this idea allegedly arises. We might call this mode of argument (i.e., asking "Where's the impression for this alleged idea?") the *empiricist challenge*. Hume explicitly applies the empiricist challenge in his attempt to deflate or revise our claims about such common philosophical ideas as "substance" (T 1.1.6.1; SBN 15-16), "space" (T 1.2.3.2; SBN 33), "vacuum" (T 1.2.5.29; SBN 65), "necessary connexion" (T 1.3.14.1; SBN 155), etc. Yet Hume himself needs some of our common philosophical ideas to get his own theory running. He wants to get rid of some ideas like "substance" and radically alter others like "self" and "causation", but he himself makes constant (and apparently unchallenged) use of philosophical ideas like "mind", "quality", "relation", etc. How can Hume help himself to these ideas?

One of the unchallenged ideas that might seem most problematic for Hume is also one of his most frequently used: the idea of "idea". Now "idea" is an abstract idea, and for Hume abstract ideas are sets of particular ideas that resemble each other in a certain way and are all "annexed" to a general term associated with that resemblance (T 1.1.7.1ff; SBN 17ff). But the set of ideas annexed to the term "idea" would be *all* our ideas – everything we could possibly think of. Moreover, Hume defines ideas in relation to impressions, but the idea of "impression" is just as problematic as the idea of "idea". The set annexed to the general term "impression" would be everything we've ever experienced. Worse still, it seems that, on the empiricist scheme, the set of all our experiences would be extensionally equivalent to the set of everything we could think of. How, then, could we distinguish ideas from impressions? We wouldn't be able to use the content of the sets annexed to these terms to distinguish their referent because the sets are identical. What, then, *could* distinguish these ideas? Presumably they would be

distinguished the same way any set of ideas grouped together as an abstract idea would be distinguished from any other set of ideas, i.e., by a "distinction of reason". For Hume a distinction of reason is a way we "view [ideas] in different aspects according to the resemblances of which they are susceptible" (T 1.1.7.18; SBN 25). But in what way do all impressions resemble each other that is different from ways all ideas resemble each other? Well, when Hume originally draws the distinction between ideas and impressions he says that "the difference betwixt these consists in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind" (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 1). This degree of liveliness is the property of perceptions Hume often calls the "vivacity" of the perception. But this move won't get Hume off the hook. He still has to answer the empiricist challenge about vivacity. Where does our idea of "vivacity" come from? According to the empiricist method, it would have to come from some impression. But vivacity is not a property we attribute to the *object* of any impression the way we attribute "whiteness" or "globeness" to the object of a white marble globe impression. Rather, vivacity is a property of the *impression itself*. Hume says it is a way ("manner") that impressions or ideas "feel" to us. So he is describing what we might call a *phenomenological property* of mental contents. Hume admits that our ordinary language has no word for this feeling, but thinks anyone who attends to his or her own consciousness will notice the property he's describing:

when I wou'd explain this *manner*, I scarce find any word that fully answers the case, but am oblig'd to have recourse to every one's feeling, in order to give him a perfect notion of this operation of the mind. An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavor to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. (T 1.3.7.7; SBN 629)

Therefore, it must be from this phenomenological feeling that our idea of vivacity arises. When we compare fictitious ideas with beliefs (or, likewise, original impressions with their copied ideas), we notice a certain resemblance between impressions that distinguishes them from ideas. This resemblance is called "vivacity". But still the question remains, *how* do we notice this resemblance? *My hypothesis is that Hume thinks consciousness (what he calls "imagination") functions like an inner sense.* Just as we are able to compare the properties of external objects through our sense perception, we are able to compare the phenomenological properties of our ideas through a kind of *inner* perception. Hume doesn't explicitly talk about the kind of inner sense I'm describing; but I think he assumes that we have it. But if this is right, then I have to answer some questions: if Hume doesn't say we have this extra sense, then why think he assumes we do? and is this extra sense compatible with the faculties Hume does say we have?

First we should notice that while Hume makes use of something like an inner sense when he talks about "impressions of reflexion" (which he identifies with "internal impressions" at T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165), this is *not* the kind of inner sense I have in mind. It might seem that impressions of reflexion could solve Hume's problem of providing a source for some of his problematic ideas like "vivacity", in which case he wouldn't need any extra inner sense to play that role. But there is much evidence that Hume thinks impressions of reflexion are just passions, a less likely candidate for the source of ideas about the way mental content feels. Hume explicitly identifies reflexions with passions again and again throughout Book I of the *Treatise*: "impressions of reflexion, *viz.* passions, desires, and emotions" (T 1.1.2.1; SBN 8), "the impressions of reflexion resolve themselves into our passions and emotions" (T 1.1.6.1; SBN 16), "our internal impressions are our passions, emotions, desires, and aversions" (T 1.2.3.3; SBN 33), etc.<sup>2</sup> And the way he proceeds to press the empiricist challenge against our ideas of

things like "substance", "space", and "vacuum" seems to depend on reflexions being limited to passions. In all of these situations, he argues the same way:

*Hume's Characteristic Argument That X Cannot Meet the Empiricist Challenge:*

- (1) Every idea is copied from an impression.
- (2) Impressions are either sensations or reflexions.
- (3) Impressions of reflexion are just passions.
- (4) A passion could not give rise to our idea of  $x$ .
- (5) Therefore, either our idea of  $x$  is a fiction or it is derived from some sensation.
- (6) Our idea of  $x$  is not derived from any sensation.
- (7) Therefore, our idea of  $x$  is a fiction.

The interesting premise for our present purposes is, of course, (3). If this premise is not true then Hume's argument fails. But Hume clearly thinks his argument works (and he uses this argument more than once), so he must think premise (3) is true. Hence there is very good evidence that Hume thinks impressions of reflexion are just passions. And if this is right, then we will need to look elsewhere for the inner sense.

But, on the other hand, there is also some apparent evidence that Hume thinks that the impressions of reflexion are *not* limited to the passions. In Book II Hume distinguishes the impressions of reflexion into the "calm" and the "violent" (T 2.1.1.3; SBN 276). There Hume suggests that it is only the *violent* reflexions which are equivalent to the reflexions we normally refer to as "passions" and that there are other, calmer, reflexions like the "sense of beauty" (T 2.1.1.3; SBN 276) and the "sense of virtue" (T 3.1.2.3; SBN 471) that we don't usually call "passions" (though they technically are). So far from feeling like passions, Hume says that these calm reflexions are "commonly so soft and gentle" that they often get mistaken for reason

instead of recognized as the passions they are (T 3.1.2.1; SBN 470). Indeed, there is at least one other calm reflexion, *viz.*, the one that gives rise to our idea of the necessary connexion between causes and effects. Let me explain.

Hume places the complex idea "causation" in the category of complex ideas called "relations" (T 1.1.4.4; SBN 12). He then goes on to note that "causation" is multiply complex. The idea "causation" is made up of the association of three other relations, namely "contiguity", "succession", and "necessary connexion" (T 1.3.2.10; SBN 77), each themselves being complex ideas. Hume thinks contiguity and succession are made up in part by our ideas of "space" and "time" (T 1.1.5.5; SBN 14). So to explain the idea "causation" with his empiricist methodology, Hume must find original impressions of space, time, and necessary connexion. We will return to Hume's inquiry into our ideas of "space" and "time" below. First let us examine his discussion of "necessity". Hume says we get the idea of "necessary connexion" from the "determination which we feel to pass from" the idea of a cause to the idea of its effect (T 1.3.14.29; SBN 169). He argues for this conclusion in the following way:

The idea of necessity arises from some impression. There is no impression convey'd by our senses, which can give rise to that idea. It must, therefore, be deriv'd from some internal impression, or impression of reflexion. There is no internal impression, which has any relation to the present business, but that propensity, which custom produces, to pass from an object to the idea of its usual attendant. This therefore is the essence of necessity. (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165)

Now, on a very literal reading it looks like Hume is saying that the impression from which the idea "necessity" is copied *just is* the mind's propensity to connect the ideas of causes with the ideas of their effects.<sup>3</sup> Hume clearly writes that there is "no impression ... but that propensity".

But Hume couldn't have meant this literally. For Hume impressions are *contents* of the mind, not *activities* of the mind. On my reading the point is that there is an impression *the object of which* is "that propensity". Of course, we must always bear in mind that that, in his discussion of the existence of body, Hume makes clear that there can be no genuine distinction between objects and perceptions. (See T 1.4.2.14; SBN 193) So perhaps that fact can account for why Hume can call a propensity an "impression" when he means that it is the "object of an impression" – he doesn't think there is any difference between these claims. This reading is confirmed when Hume recalls his discussion of causation in the conclusion to Book I. There he says that "this connexion, tie, or energy [i.e., the allegedly necessary connexion we call "causation"] lies merely in ourselves, and is nothing but that determination of the mind, which is acquired by custom, and causes us to make a transition from an object to its usual attendant" (T 1.4.7.5; SBN 266). So here it is not the *impression* which is "nothing but" an activity of the mind, but the *connexion itself*. Either way Hume is not confusing mental contents with mental activities. He is trying to say that the impression of necessity is a *feeling of* a propensity of the mind.<sup>4</sup> Here, then, we see another example of an impression of reflexion that is not a passion. But none of these reflexions seem to be the kind of impression that could give rise to our idea of "vivacity". We need an inner sense that perceives the resemblances between ideas, not one that merely feels the mind's activity (as in the case of our impression of "necessity") or feels a pleasurable sensation associated with other ideas (as in the case of our impressions of "beauty" and "virtue").

We do, however, have other places to look for this proposed inner sense. There are some philosophical ideas that come from a source that Hume explicitly does not want to classify as impressions of any kind. The idea of "space" is one example, but Hume's parallel discussion of

the idea of "time" will provide us with the relevant data in a clearer way. Hume thinks our idea of "time" is "deriv'd from the succession of our perceptions" (T 1.2.3.6; SBN 34-5). Since he reminds us about his empiricist method at the beginning of the section on our idea of "time" (see T 1.2.3.1; SBN 33 where he says that "every idea with which the imagination is furnish'd first makes its appearance in a correspondent impression"), and since he goes on to talk about the idea of "time" making "its first appearance in the mind" (T 1.2.3.9; SBN 36), it might seem that he is committed to finding an impression of "time". Furthermore since he says "it appears not as any *primary* distinct impression" (T 1.2.3.10; SBN 37, my emphasis), and since he sometimes calls impressions of reflexion "secondary" impressions (T 2.1.1.1; SBN 275), it is tempting to think Hume is pointing us toward an impression of reflexion as the source of our idea of "time". But he denies these implications: "the idea of time is not deriv'd from a particular impression mix'd up with others, and plainly distinguishable from them; but arises altogether from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number" (T 1.2.3.10; SBN 36).<sup>5</sup> So he explicitly rules out the possibility of finding an impression of time. And just in case we didn't get the message and thought he was only talking about impressions of sensation, Hume goes on to explicitly rule out finding an impression of reflexion, saying that our idea of "time" is not derived from an "impression which the mind by reflection finds in itself" (T 1.2.3.10; SBN 36), citing the familiar point (which I discussed above) that the putative impression of time couldn't be a reflexion since it would be neither an emotion nor an affection, one of which is "necessary to produce a new idea of reflection" (T 1.2.3.10; SBN 37).

I think Hume's point here is that the idea of "time" (like those of "space" and "necessary connexion") is a complex idea constructed by some natural propensity of the imagination. (Remember that he only commits himself to "simple" ideas having a correspondent impression.)

In other words Hume seems to be suggesting that we get the idea of "time" from observing the disposition of things to appear in a certain way to our mind rather from any impression of time itself. Yet Hume makes a big deal out of the fact that our idea of "time" is "always discover'd by some *perceivable* succession" (T 1.2.3.7; SBN 35), ruling out the possibility of having an idea of time without change. And he goes on to say we "take notice of the manner" of succession (T 1.2.3.10; SBN 37). How can we "perceive" or "take notice" of succession if not by an impression? What exactly is going on here? It might help to note that when Hume originally drew the idea/impression distinction, he said it just amounted to the thinking/feeling distinction (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 2). Hume's discussion of our idea of "time" recalls this distinction when he says that we can have no "original idea" unless the mind "*feels* some new original impression" (T 1.2.3.10; SBN 37, my emphasis). So I think his aim is to rule out as a basis for our idea of "time" the sort of feeling he pointed to as the basis of our idea of "necessity". Instead he wants to say we somehow "*observe* that there is a continual succession of perceptions in our mind" (T 1.2.5.29; SBN 65, my emphasis), where "observe" is not the same sort of feeling he usually calls an "impression". Further evidence for this reading is found when we notice that Hume thinks the formation of our idea of "time" is analogous to the formation of our idea of "space".<sup>6</sup> With regard to space, he says that "finding a resemblance in the disposition" of our impressions, we "found an abstract idea merely on that disposition" and "annex" that abstract idea to a general term, *viz.* the synonymous terms "extension" and "space" (T 1.2.3.5; SBN 34). So it is in "finding a resemblance" that we "take notice" of time and space.

Thus Hume's account of space and time ends up sounding very similar to the account of vivacity I suggested for him: we form all these ideas by taking notice of a resemblance between mental contents. But these new complex ideas are made up of more than just the simple ideas

that form them. The ideas have additional mental content, *viz.* content about the *way it feels* to have these ideas related in this way – what Hume calls the “manner” in which these ideas are presented to the mind. Clearly Hume thinks there is a feeling associated with vivacity, but if he is doing the same thing with space and time that he did with vivacity there must be some sort of feeling involved here, too. Yet didn't we just see that Hume ruled out any sort of feeling? No: on my reading, Hume is only ruling out a *certain sort* of feeling, *viz.* the feeling associated with the ordinary impressions of sensation and reflexion. But there is no reason he has to rule out a different sort of feeling associated with a kind of phenomenological impression with the content of a resemblance between sets of ordinary impressions. And, within Hume's empiricist methodology, if he is to have any new mental content (whether the disposition of impressions or the phenomenological properties of beliefs), this content has to arise from an impression of some sort.

This is where my hypothesis of an inner sense comes in. The way Hume talks about our ability to reflect on our consciousness and on the inner workings of our mind suggests that he thinks we can take notice of certain phenomenological properties of our ideas, e.g. their vivacity, their dispositions, or other resemblances between them. On my reading, when he implies that we can reflect on our ideas in a way that doesn't count as having an *impression* of the resemblances between them, he is only committed to saying it is a *different kind* of impression than ordinary impressions of reflexion or of sensation. But what does this difference consist in? The fact that Hume (in practice if not in theory) treats phenomenological impressions of ideas as a third kind of impression distinct from ordinary impressions of reflexion and sensation, together with the fact that Hume characterizes the idea/impression distinction as identical to the thinking/feeling distinction, suggests that he thinks of this reflecting on phenomenological resemblances as more

like an act of reason or thinking than like a case of sensation or feeling. Notice here that I'm *not* saying that Hume thinks phenomenological impressions are not feelings, but that Hume distinguishes the kind of “rational” feelings I'm calling phenomenological impressions from ordinary “sensory” feelings that Hume himself calls impressions. In short, my claim is that Hume thinks these ideas come from the *understanding* rather than the *senses*. And, on my view, that is why Hume resists calling our “taking notice” of the phenomenology an instance of having an “impression” – he thinks of impressions as paradigmatically sensory. Even reflexions (i.e., passions) are sensory in the extended sense of feeling something inside of your body. But taking notice of the vivacity of an idea is not sensory at all – it is rational. But Hume still says it involves a “feeling”; and he implies that it gives rise to new mental content. Therefore, on my reading Hume thinks we have phenomenological impressions, but resists calling them impressions since, unlike other impressions, they belong to the understanding and not the senses.

It might seem odd to say that there could be impressions of the understanding, but I think there must be impressions of some sort if Hume is to have the kind of ideas he needs, because these philosophical ideas have original mental content not contained in the sense impressions which occasion their origination in the mind; and, given how Hume describes the understanding, the impressions in question most naturally belong to the understanding. Remember that for Hume the functions of the understanding are “the comparing of ideas and the inferring of matter of fact” (T 3.1.1.18; SBN 463). The process of reflecting on phenomenological resemblances of ideas falls under the first of these, and would therefore seem to be a function of the understanding. While it is true that nothing Hume says *forces* us to read him as attributing phenomenological impressions to the understanding, it is unclear what faculty other than the understanding would on Hume’s scheme be able to compare the contents of the mind in the way

Hume describes. Furthermore, it should be remembered that Hume reduces all activities of the understanding to "conception" which he says means "the simple survey of one or more ideas" (footnote to T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96-97n.). Here Hume himself uses perceptual language ("survey") to talk about the understanding's activity, so I don't think it's much of a stretch to talk about impressions that arise from this perception of the contents of one's own mind. These phenomenological impressions, then, would be the impressions of an inner sense, which the mind makes on itself when it steps back and observes the phenomenological character of its own inner workings.<sup>7</sup>

To summarize: I have argued that Hume needs an inner phenomenological sense so he can explain how we are aware of resemblances between ideas. And he needs this sense to involve some sort of impression since the resemblances between ideas give rise to new ideas like "vivacity". But then I argued that this inner sense is distinct from the inner impressions of reflexion Hume explicitly recognizes. Therefore I concluded that Hume has a distinct, unnamed and probably unacknowledged category of inner impressions that belong to our faculty of the understanding rather than our faculty of the senses.<sup>8</sup>

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>As will soon become clear, when I am talking about an idea, as opposed to an impression or the object of an impression, I will put the term in quotation marks. So *Paris* refers to the city or to my impression of the city, but "*Paris*" refers to my idea of that city.

<sup>2</sup>Hume also equates impressions of reflexion with passions at T 1.3.2.16 (SBN 78).

<sup>3</sup>This is the way Robert Paul Wolff reads this passage. See his "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity" in *The Philosophical Review* Vol. 69, No. 3.

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<sup>4</sup>Don Garrett agrees with me. See his *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (Oxford, 1997), p. 106. Wolff thinks this is a weird reading since you can't *feel* a disposition. But this is a misunderstanding. Hume's use of "propensity" is not meant to suggest that we feel the *disposition* to form some idea. He's saying that because the mind is so disposed, if we attend carefully we can feel the mind's *actual movement* from one idea to the other. And it is at least *prima facie* plausible to think we can feel this sort of mental activity just as we can feel our body's movement. So in the end, I think it is less uncharitable to read Hume (the way Garrett does) as accidentally leaving out the word "of" than to read him (the way Wolff does) as confusing mental content with mental activity.

<sup>5</sup>Presumably he says this because if the impression "time" were distinct from the succession, it would be separable and hence would have to either be of a strange free-floating metaphysical object called "time" or be innate.

<sup>6</sup>He says, "As 'tis from the disposition of visible and tangible objects we receive the idea of space, so from the succession of ideas and impressions we form the idea of time" (T 1.2.3.7; SBN 35).

<sup>7</sup>For a reading of Hume similar to mine, arrived at independently, see Wayne Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge, 1994). Like me, Waxman posits a phenomenological consciousness distinct from impressions of reflexion. He distinguishes three kinds of mental "data": conscious, phenomenological, and experience (p. 18-19). Unlike me Waxman thinks that only conscious data counts as an actual impression in Hume's sense. So he classifies "reflexions" (i.e. passions, etc.) as conscious and therefore distinct from rational reflection on experience and phenomenology (p. 282 n.21). Waxman is certainly correct that Hume doesn't *acknowledge* that phenomenological data counts as an impression; but, if my argument is correct, Hume is

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nevertheless committed to phenomenological data in fact *being* an impression because Hume actually *treats* phenomenological data as an impression.

<sup>8</sup> My thanks to Paul Hoffman for helpful comments on several earlier drafts of this paper and to Andrews Reath and Peter Graham for comments on the penultimate draft of this paper.