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21L.017 The Art of the Probable: Literature and Probability  
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## HUME: BASIC OUTLINE

The overriding point: Everything comes down to a radical empiricism based upon impressions (we would say “sense-data”) and the mind’s capacity to *observe* or *note* the impressions, their qualities, and the ways in which they compound in producing ideas. The activity of mind in producing ideas is *not* the exercise of reason but a part of perception, everything that later came to be studied under the rubric of “the phenomenology of mind”, that is, the science that studies mental phenomena. For example, the idea of existence is not an impression conjoined with every perception as an addition but it is not the work of reason, either. Rather it is the same as the idea of an individual perception or the idea of a compound perception, say, an object. “Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent.” (Even when we know it to be imaginary.) “A like reasoning will account for the idea of *external existence*. . . . nothing is every really present with the mind but its perceptions and impressions and ideas, and that external objects become known to us only by those perceptions that they occasion.” And our minds are fit to form ideas only from our impressions; “we can never really advance a step beyond ourselves”.

In this way, the mind is supposed to discover and register as ideas a remarkably complex overlay of mind-noted qualities intrinsic either to its impressions or to its simpler ideas, thereby producing an array of distinctions between (a) memory, (b) imagination, and (c) the empirical representation of impressions, a sense of time and extension, the immediacy of existence, basic relationships (seven in number, including cause-and-effect) and the composites of everyday experience, objects and events, external and internal worlds, self and others, none of which can be thrown into skeptical doubt. Despite some of his rhetorical flourishes, Hume is not trying to induce a rampant skepticism but to give skepticism a particular focus. The point is to explain how belief in the basic things just noted is unavoidable and to deny that *a priori* reason can outdo belief and make it possible for us to know anything about the world independent of our minds that produces them.

### *Basic Principles:*

#### • *Perceptions divide into Impressions and Ideas:*

For Hume all perceptions of the human mind “resolve themselves” into either Impressions or Ideas, but the difference between these is seen largely in terms of the “force and liveliness” with which they strike the mind rather than in terms of their being qualitatively different -- impressions are generally the more forceful but one can have strong ideas and weak impressions as well.

- Impressions are those perceptions that enter with the most force and violence, and they are not limited to physical aspects of sensations, but include passions or emotions aroused by those sensations. They belong thus to the general domain of “feeling.”

#### • *Perceptions are either Simple or Complex:*

A second distinction of importance to both Ideas and Impressions is the division of perceptions into the Simple and the Complex. The simple perceptions “admit of no distinction or separation,” whereas complex perceptions involve the uniting or combining of distinct (simple) qualities.

#### • *The relationship of Impressions to Ideas*

Ideas turn out essentially to be derived from (or in a sense caused by) impressions, since Hume treats them as the “faint images” of impressions as they are taken up by thinking and reasoning. He positions himself against Locke in this regard, since he sees Locke as improperly using ideas to include all forms of perception. For Hume, ideas and impressions are distinct but correspondent.

- So, ideas and impressions generally correspond to one another, ideas appearing to be “reflections” of impressions. But this exactness holds strictly only for simple perceptions. Many

complex impressions are never exactly copied in ideas: I can imagine a city that I have never seen (that is, I can have an idea that has no real impression corresponding to it), and conversely, I can never form a perfect and exact representation of a city that I have seen (that is, I don't have an idea that corresponds exactly to the impression). So, while there is a "great resemblance" between complex impressions and ideas, it is only in the case of simple impressions that it corresponds to a simple idea (the idea of red and the impression of red when we see the sun, for instance).

- *Priority of Impressions:* All simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.

- Enumeration of particulars allows us to see a "constant conjunction" between simple ideas and correspondent impressions, and the constancy of this conjunction proves that it is not simply a matter of chance but rather involves some sort of relation of dependence.

- But in which direction does this dependence go? Hume will argue that it is the ideas that are dependent upon the impressions, and not vice versa, since thinking of the idea of red does not produce the sensation of red, whereas the sensation does produce the idea. [Has one singular counter-example of "producing" a missing shade of a colour by filling in the absence in a series, but dismisses it.]

- However, we can also form secondary ideas which are images of primary ideas: "Ideas produce the images of themselves in new ideas; but as the first ideas are supposed to be derived from impressions, it still remains true that all our simple ideas proceed either mediately or immediately from their correspondent impressions."

- *Impressions themselves are of two kinds: Sensations and Reflections.* "The first kind arises in the soul originally, and from unknown causes. The second is derived in a great measure from our ideas . . . [by the process of the mind's taking a copy] which remains after the impression [say, pain] ceases. This we call an idea. [In turn,] the idea [of pain] returns upon the soul [to] produce new impressions [aversion or fear, say], which may be called impressions of reflection, because derived from it." These again are "copied" by imagination and memory to produce new ideas, which in turn can produce new impressions. Thus, impressions of the reflective kind are "antecedent to" their correspondent ideas, but are "posterior to" those impressions of the sensation kind. In other words, reflections are impressions "mediated" by ideas that themselves have their "original" in sensations.

- *Memory and imagination* are responsible thus (in their different ways) for producing, fixing and manipulating the ideas that arise out of impressions. Memory preserves the original form (if defectively) whereas imagination has the "liberty to transpose and change its ideas."

- *Connections among ideas [relation qua quality]:* How does one idea "naturally" lead to or introduce another? There must universal principles or qualities governing how ideas are joined together, producing regularity and uniformity (otherwise the same simple ideas would never fall regularly into complex ones). In other words, there must be some bond, some associating quality that connects one idea to another -- not that this bond is either insuperable or determining of what ideas can be joined together ("a gentle force"). Hume identifies three such qualities:

- Resemblance
- Contiguity in time or place
- Cause and Effect

Notes too that connections can be mediated -- that is, we can form chains of resemblance, contiguity, or causation via intermediary ideas that are connected to others on either side as it were through the same kind of relation.

- Causation connects objects not only when one produces a motion or action in the other but also

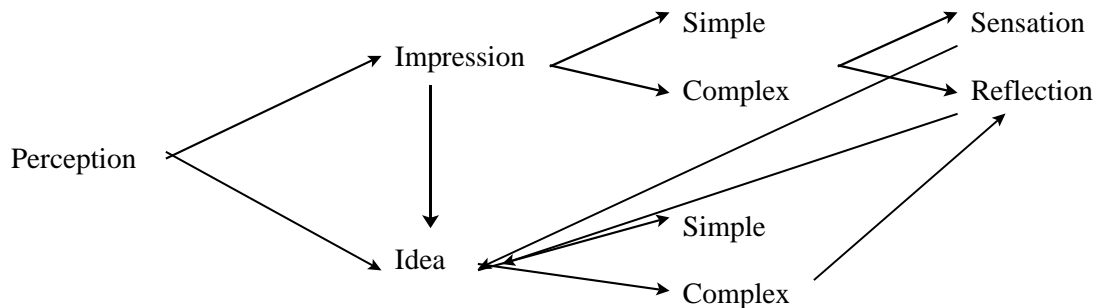
“when it has the power of producing it.” That is to say, the possibility in every case of producing the effect marks the presence of a causal link even if the effect is not produced. [In this context, Hume adds a critical remark typical of his sense of the world, that “nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes.”]

*Relations:* Complex ideas arise from some principle of union among our simple ideas, and can be divided into relations, modes and substances. Relations are either qualities whereby two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and one naturally introduces the other (resemblance, contiguity and causation) -- OR they mark the aspect through which two ideas are connected to one another in thought (even if they share no qualities). The latter group of relations for Hume consist of:

- Identity (being one thing: a constant and unchangeable object)
- Comparisons of quantity and number
- Comparisons of quality (greater or lesser weight)
- Contrariety: there is only one true contrary for Hume: existence and non-existence, these being the only two ideas that are contrary “in themselves.”

*Abstract Ideas:* Follows Berkeley in the assertion that “all general ideas are nothing but particular ideas, annexed to a certain term which gives them a more extensive signification, and makes them recall upon occasion other individuals [that is, particulars] which are similar to them.” Basically, Hume thinks that we simply collect particulars “in such an imperfect manner as may serve the purposes of life,” and then from the resemblances among them, we apply the same name to them despite their real differences. “After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects . . . [but] only in power” rather than distinctly.” “A particular idea becomes general by being annexed to a general term; that is, to a term, which from a customary conjunction has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination.”

- Custom itself cannot be explained in terms of some ultimate cause: “to explain the ultimate causes of our mental actions is impossible. ‘Tis sufficient if can give any satisfactory account of them from experience and analogy.”



The arrows are to be read as meaning either “divides into” or “influences”, and there should be vertical downward arrows between both sets of the words “simple” and “complex”.