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Hume's Impression/Idea Distinction

DAVID LANDY

Abstract: Understanding the distinction between impressions and ideas that Hume draws in the opening paragraphs of his *A Treatise on Human Nature* is essential for understanding much of Hume's philosophy. This, however, is a task that has been the cause of a good deal of controversy in the literature on Hume. I here argue that the significant philosophical and exegetical issues previous treatments of this distinction (such as the force and vivacity reading and the external-world reading) encounter are extremely problematic. I propose an alternative reading of this distinction as being between original mental entities and copied mental entities. I argue that Hume takes himself to discover this distinction as that which underlies our pre-theoretical sorting of mental entities. Thus, while the Copy Principle is initially treated by Hume as a mere empirical fact, it later comes to play a more substantial explanatory role in his account of human nature. This reading makes Hume's distinction a more philosophically robust one, and avoids many of the exegetical difficulties of previous interpretations.

Hume sets out in the first Book of the *Treatise*¹ to present a theory of the mental according to which everything mental can be accounted for in terms of mental entities and their relations and behaviors. Hume calls such mental entities "perceptions" and divides these into two important classes: impressions and ideas. Hume's official position on what determines whether a mental entity is an impression or an idea has been the subject of some debate, largely because Hume's text is subtly ambiguous on the issue. One main point dividing scholars has been how to treat

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the degree of force and vivacity that impressions and ideas have—whether to take this as the determinative criterion for what makes impressions and ideas what they are, or as a mere symptom, helpful for distinguishing the two in introspection, but not constitutive of what it is to *be* either an impression or an idea.² I will argue that force and vivacity are best understood as phenomenal *symptoms* by which we recognize a distinction that is best *explained* by Hume’s Copy Principle, so that strictly speaking, the distinction between ideas and impressions is drawn using that principle, and *not* force and vivacity.³

I will argue, that is, that Hume observes that we seem to be very good at—although we make mistakes at times—sorting our perceptions into two classes—impressions and ideas—and that what *explains* our ability to do so is the fact that there really *is* a distinction between these two *kinds* of things: one is a copy of some other mental entity (ideas), the other is not (impressions). I will further argue that, for Hume, what it is to be a copy is to meet two necessary and *jointly* sufficient conditions. The first is that a copy is always caused by—in the sense that Hume makes of this notion after the proper investigation undertaken later in the *Treatise*—that of which it is a copy. The second is that a copy always exactly resembles that of which it is a copy. Failure of an entity to meet either one of these criteria means that that entity is *not* a copy. (It is worth noting at the outset that Hume’s is a rudimentary analysis of “copy,” whose merits and faults could be the topic of an investigation distinct from the current one; we will proceed using Hume’s notion.)⁴ Impressions always so fail in one way or the other and so are not copies. Ideas always meet *both* criteria and so are copies. This is the real distinction upon which we touch when we intuitively sort our perceptions into these two classes. I will begin my investigation of this issue, however, by examining the force and vivacity interpretation.

The greatest advantage of reading the distinction between impressions and ideas as being constituted by the degree of force and vivacity that mental entities have is that this seems to many to be the most straightforward reading of Hume’s actual text. Hume writes, for instance, that

[a]ll the perceptions of the mind are of two kinds, *viz.* impressions and ideas, which differ from each other only in their different degrees of force and vivacity. (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96)

If the *only* difference between impressions and ideas is their degree of force and vivacity, the only candidate available for that which makes a mental entity an impression or an idea is degree of force and vivacity. I will return to this particular passage later to explain how it can be read so as to be consistent with drawing the distinction between impressions and ideas using criteria other than degree of force and vivacity. For present purposes, however, it will be sufficient to point out that

whatever advantages such passages lend to the interpretation we are considering are at least counterbalanced (if not outweighed) by other passages in which Hume relies on some *other* criteria for drawing this distinction. For instance, in the *Enquiry*, Hume writes of ideas that,

except the mind be disordered by disease or madness, they never can arrive at such a pitch of vivacity, as to render these perceptions altogether undistinguishable. (EHU 2.1; SBN 17)⁵

This implies that in the mind that *is* diseased or mad ideas *can* obtain a degree of force and vivacity equal to that of impressions. For it to be possible, however, to say that some idea has the same degree of force and vivacity as some impression, there must be some criterion *other than* force and vivacity that makes these different kinds of mental entities.

Thus far, Hume's texts on these issues seem to be ambiguous, and so I now want to turn to more *philosophically* motivated reasons for thinking that there are enough serious problems with the force and vivacity reading to motivate looking elsewhere. (We will have cause to return to some further texts a bit later.) We can proceed, for now, under the assumption that the best way to understand Hume's distinction is whatever way, in accordance with the text, makes his philosophical position strongest. As the last passage demonstrated, one encounters the most serious difficulties with the force and vivacity interpretation in cases where we, and Hume, would intuitively think of a particular mental entity as an idea, but where its degree of force and vivacity is clearly equal to, or greater than, that of some corresponding impression.⁶ Barry Stroud provides a particularly compelling example of just this sort. Stroud imagines a detective who upon first examining a murder-scene finds nothing out of the ordinary. Remembering the scene later, the detective recalls that there was a poker leaning on the left-hand side of the fireplace, despite the fact that the victim was right-handed. This fact suddenly stands out to the detective as the key to solving the crime because he realizes that since so-and-so is left-handed, he must be the murderer (Stroud, 28). The moral of the story is, of course, that the *memory* (a paradigm example of an idea for Hume) of part of the scene of the crime is more vivacious to the detective than was the impression of it, but that in order to express this we must rely on some criterion for distinguishing impressions from ideas other than force and vivacity. What makes this approach even more difficult as an interpretation of Hume is that Hume himself is aware of such counterexamples, and seems to retreat from using force and vivacity as criterial when considering them, as we saw him do in the passage from the *Enquiry* above. So it seems that Hume does not, and ought not, use force and vivacity as the criteria for determining whether a mental entity is an impression or an idea.⁷

If, then, we are to reject degree of force and vivacity as the criterion for determining whether a mental entity is an impression or an idea, to make sense of this distinction, we will need some other criterion to do this work. Again, however, even amongst those who agree on this much, scholarly opinion is divided. Jonathan Bennett, for instance, is a proponent of the view that impressions of sensation, at least, *must* be explained as being those mental entities that first make their appearance as a result of people veridically perceiving physical objects.⁸ This view, however, comes with difficulties of its own, one of which is particularly pressing. This is that, as is well known, the very notions of physical objects, perceiving physical objects, and veridically perceiving physical objects all become problematic (at the least) later in the *Treatise*—in no small part *because* of Hume’s theory of impressions and ideas—and so provide an unstable and awkward foundation on which to interpret Hume as building. That is, if the notion of veridically perceiving physical objects is to ground the distinction between impressions and ideas, but that notion turns out to be bankrupt later in the *Treatise*, then we would also be forced to give up this distinction. That, however, seems far too high a price to pay. Furthermore, Hume’s official line on the origins of impressions—found in close proximity to his discussions of the distinction between impressions and ideas—is that impressions of sensation come from “unknown causes” (T 1.1.2.1; SBN 7). Hume steadfastly refuses to speculate on the origins of impressions, and so any interpretation of the distinction between impressions and ideas that relies essentially on positing some particular origin for these cannot be one that we attribute to Hume without a great deal of reservation.

Stephen Everson recognizes this difficulty and takes it as a condition on an acceptable interpretation of Hume that the distinction between impressions and ideas be drawn entirely without reference to anything non-mental, a condition I endorse. Everson infers from this that another condition on any such account is that “one be able to distinguish impressions and ideas introspectively” (Everson, 404), and he takes it that Hume thought the same. If true, this would be reason to reconsider the force and vivacity interpretation, despite its difficulties, as force and vivacity clearly does meet this latter requirement. Everson does just this. It is important to see, however, that this second condition does not, in fact, follow from the previous one unless one *also* attributes to Hume the thesis that everything mental is available to introspection. That is, it does not follow from the fact that the distinction between impressions and ideas must be drawn without reference to anything non-mental that the distinction thus drawn must be introspectively available, *unless* it is also true that everything mental is transparent to introspection. If something’s being available to introspection means that it can be known infallibly, we must reject this further condition.⁹ Given, for instance, Hume’s *error theory* concerning our concept of causation, for example, attributing this supporting premise to Hume would clearly be a mistake. That error theory

clearly demonstrates that Hume thinks that there are at least *some* mental states that are *not* infallibly available to introspection. It follows, then, that availability to introspection, in this sense, cannot be a necessary condition for a state's being a mental state. Still, we can agree with Everson, against Bennett, that since Hume wishes to remain uncommitted about the source of impressions, we cannot *define* these in a way that makes essential reference to this source.

Of course, this transparency thesis is not without its own independent support in Hume's texts. For instance, in the section of the *Treatise*, "Of skepticism with regard to the senses," Hume discusses the thesis that our senses represent the world as distinct from the mind. He writes,

Add to this, that every impression, external and internal, passions, affections, sensations, pains and pleasures, are originally on the same footing; and that whatever other differences we may observe among them, they appear, all of them, in their true colours, as impressions or perceptions. And indeed, if we consider the matter aright, 'tis scarce possible it shou'd be otherwise, nor is it conceivable that our senses shou'd be more capable of deceiving us in the situation and relations, than in the nature of our impressions. For since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear. Every thing that enters the mind, being in *reality* a perception, 'tis impossible any thing shou'd to *feeling* appear different. This were to suppose, that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken. (T 1.4.2.7; SBN 190; my emphasis)

Hume's strong language here certainly seems to imply that he endorses some sort of transparency thesis, and one that implies a kind of infallibility as well. He has argued earlier that it is impossible for our senses to deceive us about the nature of our perceptions. Here he claims that it is equally impossible that they should deceive us about the situation and relations of such perceptions. He claims further that because consciousness is aware of every perception, we necessarily see such perceptions *as* perceptions, not as something distinct from the mind (as we would have to in order, Hume claims, to obtain the idea of an external world).

What is crucial in understanding this passage is that one keep in mind that Hume is here arguing that *the senses* are not the source of our mistake about the distinction between the external world and our perceptions. He is decidedly *not* arguing for the thesis that no such mistake is possible. *That* would make Hume's puzzlement over the source of such a mistake utterly inexplicable. In fact, this passage occurs as part of an argument *for* the conclusion that it is "some inference either of the reason or imagination" that is the source of this error. Of course, what this means is that while it may be that the *senses* are not the source of any error

about our mental states, there are *other* sources for such error. Thus, introspective infallibility still cannot be a necessary feature of mental processes, for it may be the case that some feature of our mental lives other than our senses deceives us about the nature, situation, or relations of our perceptions.

Furthermore, in the second half of this passage, in which Hume claims that it is impossible that we should ever be deceived about what appears to consciousness, it is important to notice that what Hume is here explicitly addressing is the possibility that we should ever think that something presented to consciousness is a *non-mental entity*. Hume's claim is merely that what appears to consciousness is necessarily mental, and can be known to be such. This follows almost immediately from Hume's views on consciousness and mentality. This thesis does imply that all mental entities can be known, via introspection, to be such. It does not, however, imply anything about whether the properties or relations in which such entities stand can be so known. With that said, I take it that the best evidence that Hume held the thesis that everything mental can be infallibly known via introspection has been defeated. Thus, we can safely endorse Everson's condition that the criterion for distinguishing impressions from ideas must not make essential reference to anything non-mental, while still resisting his claim that this distinction must be available to introspection.

We now have one condition in place that our alternative criterion for grounding the impression/idea distinction must meet, and we have rejected another. At this point, it will be best to turn once again to the texts for our next clue. In particular, the following two passages concerning ideas and impressions from the *Enquiry* and the *Treatise*, respectively, will be of some help.

[A]ll our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones. (EHU 2.5; SBN 19)

[A]ll our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly resemble. (T 1.1.1.7; SBN 4)

What is noteworthy about these passages is that, while we find Hume in the first passage again gesturing at the difference in degree of force and vivacity of impressions and ideas, we find him in both passages also emphasizing the genitive difference between the two kinds of mental entities—that is, he is pointing out that ideas are *copies* of impressions. While many readers of Hume take this to be a mere fact *about* impressions and ideas, it is this difference that I propose we take as the *criterion* that determines whether a mental entity is an impression or an idea.¹⁰ Impressions are the original objects of the mind, derived from sources unknown; they are not copies of any other mental entities. Ideas are copies, either

of impressions or of other ideas. It is this difference that makes a perception either an impression or an idea.

With that said, a number of tasks have suddenly made their way on to our agenda. The first will be to explicate the key notion here of what it is, for Hume, for one mental entity to be a copy of another. The next will be to address objections to using this particular criterion for distinguishing impressions from ideas. The last will be to return to the texts that seemed to support the force and vivacity reading of this distinction to show how they are also at least compatible with the proposed criterion.

To begin, then, we can notice that in seeking evidence for his Copy Principle—the thesis that all ideas, are, in fact, copies of impressions, or copies of copies, and so forth—Hume relies on two kinds of evidence: evidence showing that ideas exactly resemble their corresponding impressions, and evidence showing that ideas are caused by their corresponding impressions.¹¹ So Hume cites as evidence for this principle first that,

[t]he first circumstance, that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity . . . the ideas I form are exact representations of the impressions I felt; nor is there any circumstance of the one, which is not to be found in the other. (T 1.1.1.3; SBN 2)

And next that,

[t]he constant conjunction of our resembling perceptions, is a convincing proof, that the one are the causes of the other; and this priority of the impressions is an equal proof, that our impressions are the causes of our ideas, not our ideas of our impressions. (T 1.1.1.8; SBN 4)

A word is in order on each of these conditions. Firstly, it is worth noting that the Exact Resemblance Condition applies only to the “circumstances” of ideas and impressions, where “circumstance” is best understood here as what we might call its characteristic, or imagistic, quality. The thought here is that impressions and ideas have a certain imagistic quality—be it a particular color, shade and hue, or a note, timbre and tone, and so forth—without which that perception is not the impression or idea that it is, but rather an impression or idea *of* something else (if impressions can be said to be *of* anything). For instance, one’s idea of some painting, say, is only an idea of *that* painting if it exactly resembles that painting; change a brushstroke here and a color there, and one now has an idea of some other, slightly different, painting. So the Exact Resemblance Condition is actually that a copy must exactly resemble its original in all essential qualities.¹² This importantly

excludes degrees of force and vivacity, as the above quotation makes clear, and as we will discuss later, relational properties holding between mental entities.

Regarding the Causal Condition, one might object here that just as we rejected the objective-realm account of impressions because the notion of an objective realm becomes problematized for Hume, so should we be hesitant to place *causation* in so central a role in our own account because this becomes equally problematized later in the *Treatise*. The key here, though, is that the two notions are not *equally* problematized. Hume offers an *error theory* regarding our concept of causation, complete with an account of how we can justifiably put that concept to use. He offers no such alternative for “substance,” the key problematic term in the objective-realm interpretation. And as the above quotation clearly demonstrates, it is only the de-problematized notion of causation that actually does come into play when Hume employs this condition. Without delving into the issues surrounding Hume on causation too deeply, we can note that Hume offers a two-part alternative construal of the concept of causation:

An object precedent and contiguous to another, and where all the objects resembling the former are plac'd in a like relation of priority and contiguity to those objects, that resemble the latter. (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 170)

An object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it in the imagination, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other. (T 1.3.14.31; SBN 170)

Clearly, at least the first part of this two-part construal is operative in Hume's use of the Causal Condition, and arguably the latter is as well. Hume's argument for the Copy Principle relies on exactly the premise that ideas and impressions are constantly conjoined, with impressions always preceding their correspondent ideas. Thus, the distinction between impressions and ideas is not undermined by placing causation, *properly construed*, at the center of Hume's account, which is just what Hume does. It would only be so undermined if it was the problematic notion of causation—as a metaphysically necessary connection that outruns regular succession—that was used, which it is not.

What both of these conditions reflect, which will be important for us to keep in mind throughout the course of our investigation, is that what Hume is concerned with in speaking about perceptions is the nature of the entity that does the representing, not that which is the *object* of this representing. In the specific case of perceptions, this object is a certain mental entity: an impression or idea. Thus can Hume speak of the *cause* of a perception, for example. This is shorthand, in Hume, for the cause of the *existence* of the perception. Similarly, when Hume

speaks of the exact resemblance of one perception to another, he is speaking of the exact resemblance of one mental *entity* to another mental *entity*. Finally, this has important consequences for how we conceive of force and vivacity. One *might* think that these are features of the object of representation, but this, I think, is pretty clearly wrong of Hume's account. I will come back to this subject later, but this much of a telegraphic remark will be appropriate here: conceiving perceptions as mental *entities* allows us to construe force and vivacity as non-essential, non-relational qualities of such mental entities. That this ontological commitment is at the core of Hume's semantics is important to keep clear about.¹³ We will have more to say about the *object* of representation—and how such representations come to so much as *have* objects—later.

So, the Copy Principle states that all (simple) ideas exactly resemble in their intrinsic qualities, and are caused by, some corresponding impression. It is worth pausing for a moment in our dialectic to note that, qua an account of what it is for one thing to be a copy of another, Hume's Copy Principle leaves much to be desired. While Hume's two conditions might be necessary conditions on copies—although the exact resemblance condition is probably too strong as it stands—it is hard to imagine that they would also be sufficient. For instance, there are certainly cases in which one thing might be the cause of another, and *just so happen* to exactly resemble it, but nonetheless the latter would not be a copy of the former. Ruth Garrett Millikan, in *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories*, spends a good deal of time presenting her own account of copying, which—although she disavows that this account is anything more than a definition of a homophonic term of art—is much closer to an adequate analysis than is Hume's.¹⁴ Nonetheless, Hume's definition will do for the purposes of a rudimentary account of the mental, to be supplemented as is needed by those who take up the task of keeping his research program contemporary.

It is also worth pausing to address a potential confusion about Hume's account of copying. Hume's conditions—exact resemblance and causation—are, as Hume's conceives them, necessary and *only jointly* sufficient. If a perception, or any potential copy, fails to meet *either* of the conditions, then it is not a copy. So, for example, suppose the phone rings twice. The second ring exactly resembles the first. However, since the second ring is not *caused by* the first—something that Hume certainly wants to be able to say—the second is not a copy of the first. Suppose further that I throw a baseball through a window, and the window breaks. My throwing of the baseball is the *cause* of the window breaking, but because the window's breaking does not exactly, or at all, resemble the throwing of the ball, the former is not a copy of the latter. There are two ways, that is, for something to *fail* to be a copy. It can *either* not exactly resemble that which causes it, *or* not be caused by that which it exactly resembles.¹⁵ This will be important to keep in mind, especially when we reach our discussion of impressions of reflection.

Hume's version of the Copy Principle, then, states that all (simple) ideas exactly resemble in their intrinsic qualities, and are caused by, some corresponding impression. This is a familiar claim of Hume's, although, as mentioned earlier, it is not usually put to use in quite the way we are doing here. It is usually presented as a claim *about* impressions and ideas, not as a criterion for what it is *to be* an impression or an idea. Drawing the distinction between impressions and ideas this way, employing the Copy Principle to do this work, means that we must now face a cluster of issues in Hume scholarship over which there has, again, been some disagreement. We can begin with an objection to drawing the distinction this way, and will soon be off and running; the objection runs as follows. If we draw the distinction between impressions and ideas along these lines, don't we make Hume's citing of empirical evidence in support of the Copy Principle, and his claim to be willing to entertain *empirical counterexamples* to the Copy Principle, utterly mysterious and/or nonsensical? That is, if "impressions" and "ideas" are *defined* as original mental entities and copied mental entities, respectively, how could empirical evidence ever come to bear one way or the other on the claim that impressions are original mental entities, and so forth? On the other hand, scholars have wondered, if the Copy Principle is merely an empirical claim, and Hume is genuinely prepared to consider counterexamples to it, how can he use it to *refute* the claims of other philosophers that contradict it? On what grounds do these claims count as refuted rather than as counterexamples to the Copy Principle itself? Furthermore, on a somewhat different though clearly relevant note, what the heck is going on with the missing shade of blue, which Hume admits as an *actual* counterexample to the Copy Principle?!

The best way to begin to answer these questions is to look at the process Hume goes through in proposing, defending, and employing the Copy Principle, and to take note of just what Hume is up to at each stage. Hume begins this process by calling his readers' attention to a distinction—the distinction between impressions and ideas—of which he thinks we all already have an intuitive grasp. He writes that,

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; SBN 2)

We can all pretty well sort our mental entities into impressions and ideas already, even if we have never used these words to describe them, or thought about doing so at all explicitly. Just to make sure of this, and to focus our attention on the right distinction, Hume cites some paradigmatic examples of each (sensations, emotions, and passions in the case of impressions, memories in the case of ideas), and points to certain phenomenal qualities (degree of force and vivacity) by which each is

commonly recognized.¹⁶ So far, the only important philosophical work done is to have called our attention to this distinction with which we are all already, Hume presumes, familiar.

Next, Hume moves through the simple/complex distinction, which becomes important soon after, but which we can skip for the moment. He then announces that,

[h]aving by these divisions given an order and arrangement to our objects, we may now apply ourselves to consider with the more accuracy their qualities and relations. (T 1.1.1.3; SBN 2)

That is, having drawn our attention to and made clear what the distinctions are that are to be the object of the current inquiry we can get to the business of investigating what grounds them. That is, again, we are all capable of sorting our perceptions into impressions and ideas. Hume now wants to consider if our so sorting our perceptions corresponds to any *real* difference of kind among those perceptions (other than that some are of the kind that get sorted as impressions and others are of the kind that get sorted as ideas). Hume is concerned with what, if anything, *accounts for* our sorting of perceptions into these two classes. The question that is now before Hume is what qualities must a mental entity have if it is to be an impression or an idea (if there is to be such a distinction), and how is this distinction related to the simple/complex one. This, of course, is exactly where Hume first proposes the two criteria that make up the Copy Principle; a copy must exactly resemble its original, and it must be caused by that original. So, the Copy Principle is first introduced by Hume as a way of accounting for a distinction on which we all already have some intuitive grasp.

Accordingly, Hume's next step is to provide evidence showing that the distinction with which we are all already familiar *can* be accounted for in this way, that is, that our pre-theoretical sorting of mental entities into impressions and ideas matches up with those mental entities that are original and those that are copied. As we have already seen, he does this in two stages corresponding to the two aspects of the Copy Principle. First he notes that by introspecting he has discovered that ideas do seem to exactly resemble impressions, and next he presents evidence that ideas are also caused by impressions. Hume has now presented evidence that shows that (a) ideas are all copies of impressions, and thereby, (b) this is what grounds our intuitive, pre-theoretical sorting of our mental entities into these two classes; that is, it is this difference that *accounts for* our sorting our perceptions this way. For instance, it is *because* ideas are copies and impressions are not that the former are less forceful and vivacious than the latter, and it is that fact, in turn, that helps us distinguish one kind of perception from the other introspectively as we do. (The gist of this explanation is that when ideas are copied from impressions some, but

not all, of the force and vivacity from the latter is transferred to the former. So, copying plays a crucial role not only in constituting the real distinction between impressions and ideas, but also thereby in accounting for the phenomenal quality of this distinction. This is exactly what a good account of what underlies appearances ought to do.)

The Copy Principle, according to this story, is something like a *theoretical explanatory* principle. We start out with a distinction with which we are all familiar. We then wonder if there is anything really to this distinction, if our sorting of mental entities corresponds to any real difference between them. We discover that it does. What we intuitively place in the category of ideas are all copies of what we intuitively place in the category of impressions. So, the distinction at which we were getting all along (via differences in degrees of force and vivacity, for example) is really the distinction between copied mental entities and original ones. In fact, even our being able so to use, for example, force and vivacity to recognize this distinction is accounted for by this theoretical explanatory hypothesis—as noted above. As science—and keep in mind that Hume takes himself to be conducting the science of man—often does, Hume’s theory is one that explains not only what underlies the appearances, but also why the appearances are as they are. Of course, this can *only* be the case *if it is true* that ideas are copies of impressions. So Hume’s task is two-part; first he must show *that* ideas are copies of impressions, and second he must show that *it is because* ideas are copies of impressions that we can sort them as we do. In this sense, there is both an empirical component to the Copy Principle as well as a criterial one. Via empirical means, the Copy Principle is discovered to be true, and it is thenceforth employed in an explanatory and criterial role. The principle is *justified* empirically, and *employed* explanatorily. In those first paragraphs of the *Treatise*, then, Hume presents the evidence in support of the criterial component *by* presenting evidence for the empirical component.

Having presented that case, Hume is now honest enough to present the case *against*—the missing shade of blue. Before we move on to discussing this example in more detail, however, we must stop to explain what critics of Hume have drawn attention to: namely, that Hume does not here consider the claims of his philosophical opponents that contradict the Copy Principle as counterexamples to his proposed way of accounting for the intuitive distinction between impressions and ideas.

What Hume has done so far is to make an empirical claim—that all ideas are copies of impressions—and a theoretical one—that this empirical claim gives us good reason to suppose that what grounds our intuitive distinction between impressions and ideas is that the latter are copies of the former. The objection now on the table is that his original empirical claim is not well-founded, that there are some ideas that are not, and could not be, copied from any impression. Instead

of taking his *empirical* claim to be refuted, the critic complains, Hume seemingly rejects the very possibility of such counterexamples, and thus grants to his empirical claim something like the status of an a priori truth.

To begin evaluating this objection we can rule out one extreme and unreasonable version of it. It would, in general, be an impossibly high standard to demand of disputants that every otherwise well-founded empirical claim on which they rely be abandoned in the face of just any purported counterexample. This would be an especially egregious standard in the cases where the empirical claim is supported by a wealth of *uncontroversial* evidence, and the purported counterexample is a particularly *controversial* one. Any empirical claim with a wealth of evidence supporting it should at least enjoy some slight benefit of the doubt in the face of merely prima facie counterexamples. The correct procedure in such cases would seem to be to undertake a careful scrutiny of the purported counterexample to see, at least, whether it could be explained in some way that did not contradict the otherwise well-founded empirical claim, and perhaps in doing so to take into account what would be gained or lost were the counterexample to prove to be genuine. It is this very reasonable procedure, and not the rash brandishing of the Copy Principle as an irrefutable a priori principle, that Hume does undertake when confronted with one of the Copy Principle's most formidable purported counterexamples, the idea of necessary connection:

Shall the despair of success make me assert, that I am here possess'd of an idea, which is not preceded by any similar impression? This wou'd be too strong a proof of levity and inconstancy; since the contrary principle has been already so firmly establish'd, as to admit of no farther doubt; at least, till we have more fully examin'd the present difficulty. (T 1.3.2.12; SBN 77)

Hume here appeals to the fact that the Copy Principle is supported by a great deal of evidence in order to warrant, not tossing aside the purported counterexample, but rather investigating the matter further.¹⁷ Of course, what Hume finds in these further investigations is directly relevant to whether or not he ought to consider such purported counterexamples genuine. To stick with the current example—necessary connection—Hume finds that this idea would not only be a counterexample to the Copy Principle, but would also have to be utterly unlike any other ideas with which we find ourselves. That is, it couldn't be just some mental entity intuitively like an idea that snuck in without being copied from any impression—like the missing shade of blue;¹⁸ rather, it would have to be a wholly different *kind* of mental entity, which would in turn require a complete overhauling of an otherwise well-tested *system* of explanatory hypotheses. None of this is to say that it is *impossible* that we have an idea of metaphysically necessary connection, but it is certainly enough to warrant proceeding to explore alternative avenues.

Furthermore, there is in Hume's favor the very fact that he is able to plausibly use the Copy Principle to ground the intuitive distinction between impressions and ideas. Anyone who wanted to claim that there are some ideas that are not copied from impressions would then be left with the burden of explaining just what distinction they were employing in making such a claim. We have already seen the difficulties attending such a project, and it is certainly to Hume's credit that he is able to marshal such a well-evidenced empirical claim to do this work.

All of which is not to say that Hume might not be wrong in the end. Rather, the point has been merely to show that there is a way that Hume can use the Copy Principle to ground the distinction between impressions and ideas without having to treat it as either an analytic truth about mental entities, or a mere empirical claim. It does have an empirical component, but it is not a *mere* empirical claim. It is a well-founded empirical claim that, because we have some independent *intuitive* grasp on the distinction at hand, can be used as a *theoretical underpinning* of that distinction.

Now, to tidy things up, we must turn to the missing shade of blue example. The case is as follows. Suppose that a person has had impressions of, and formed ideas of, a wide variety of shades of blue. Suppose, in fact, that—assigning each shade of blue of which they have had an impression a letter—they have impressions of shades A through L and N through Z. Hume admits that they would, though they have never had an *impression* of M, be able to form an idea of it. The first thing to notice about this example is that it differs from, say, the necessary connection example in that it is an instance of a *non-controversial* purported counterexample, so its standing as a potential counterexample to the Copy Principle is immediately *prima facie* better.

The second thing to notice about it is that once again it relies on our pre-theoretical, intuitive notion of what the distinction is between impressions and ideas. That is, if what it *means* to be an idea is just to be a mental entity that is a copy of some other mental entity, this case should be impossible. The first mental entity that is of this M should be considered an impression of it. Intuitively, however, this seems wrong. The perception of M—perhaps because of its degree of force and vivacity, perhaps because of the context in which it appears, and so forth—just seems more plausibly regarded as an idea, more like a memory than like a first encounter. Given that, however, this seems like a powerful counterexample not only to the truth of the empirical component of the Copy Principle, but also to Hume's attempt to use it to ground the intuitive impression/idea distinction.

The position that I will now defend is that the Copy Principle *qua* empirical claim *does* admit of this exception, as Hume explicitly tells us, but that this does not undermine the use to which he puts it in drawing the impression/idea distinction. The difficulty with the latter part of this claim is that if what it is to be an idea is to be a copy of some mental entity, and what it is to be an impression is to

not be a copy of any other mental entity, then it seems that admitting that there could be, and actually *is*, an idea which is not a copy of some other mental entity seems to make no sense. The way out of this predicament, as we are about to see, is to recognize that the idea of M resembles the impressions that caused it in such a way that it is *as good as* a copy of those impressions.

It will be helpful to beat around the neighboring bushes here, starting by contrasting this idea of M with impressions of reflection—another class of mental entities that differ from impressions of sensation in that, while not *copies* of other mental entities, they are at least *caused by* other mental entities. What earns impressions of reflection the appellation “impression” is that while they are *caused by* other mental entities, they are not *copies* of other mental entities because they do not resemble (exactly or roughly) the mental entities that cause them. Thus their circumstances, or essential qualities, are original to the mind, even though their causal history is not.¹⁹ The idea of M seems to share these features; it is caused by other mental entities (impressions and ideas of A–L and N–Z), and yet it does not exactly resemble any of these. The important difference between impressions of reflection and the idea of M, however, is that while the circumstances of impressions of reflection are original to the mind, the story is a little more complicated with the idea of M. Its circumstances do not *exactly* resemble that of the impressions that caused it, but do resemble them *in a way*. This phenomenon is also displayed elsewhere in Hume’s system. *Complex* ideas often do not exactly resemble the impressions that cause them, but because they are composed of simple ideas that do exactly resemble the impressions that cause *them*, they are properly classifiable as ideas. Of course, the idea of M is, presumably, a *simple* idea, so we cannot explain its status as an idea as deriving from its component parts.

Now, while the idea of M is like a complex idea in that it does not *exactly* resemble the impressions that caused it, and it is different from a complex idea in that it is not composed of *parts* that exactly resemble the impressions that caused it, it does still resemble these impressions *in some sense*. Specifically, it resembles them in a very particular instance of the way that colors and other simple ideas can resemble each other. Hume writes of this more general phenomenon that,

[’t]is evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou’d be distinct or separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho’ their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. (T 1.1.7.7n; SBN 637)

Clearly, Hume thinks that simple ideas, and specifically colors, can resemble each other. The missing shade of blue is a very particular instance of this kind of

resembling. The idea of M resembles the ideas of L and N *so much* that we can arrive at M simply by filling in the gap between L and N. The very fact of our being able to do this, in turn, shows that the resemblance is so close between M and N, and M and L, that while the idea of M is not strictly speaking copied, it is *as good as* copied. It is not as if, as is the case with impressions, the content of M is *utterly* inexplicable. The example, in fact, is only plausible because it is so obvious where the content of M comes from: L and N. So, while the Copy Principle does admit of this exception, it can still ground the impression/idea distinction because this is not an example of, so to speak, a *completely* original idea, which would undermine this use, but rather it is an example of a perception that is *as good as* a copy, and so properly classifiable as an idea. To see this we need only note that had Hume chosen to change the Exact Resemblance Condition of the Copy Principle to something like “[a] copy must exactly resemble that which caused it, *or resemble that which caused it in the way that M resembles L and N,*” not much would be lost in his subsequent use of it.

Before we move on, there is an important dialectical objection that we must now consider. One might want to object here that given the line that we earlier took towards the force and vivacity reading, such an account of what goes on in these passages ought to be off limits to us now. That is, earlier we objected to the force and vivacity reading of the distinction between impressions and ideas on the grounds that there are places in his writings where Hume clearly relies on something *other* than force and vivacity to draw this distinction. If, however, it is part of our own reading that at times Hume relies on our pre-theoretical, intuitive ability to make this distinction, it would seem that the proponents of the force and vivacity reading ought to be able to appeal to this pre-theoretical use in the cases that were cited as problematic for them. That is, the proponents of the force and vivacity reading might account for the instances in which Hume relies on some criterion other than degree of force and vivacity by appealing to Hume’s use of the pre-theoretical, intuitive notion of the distinction between impressions and ideas just as we have.

Furthermore, it should be noted that while Hume relies on our pre-theoretical notions of force and vivacity to motivate the intuition that the idea of the missing shade of blue is an *idea*, nothing in *this* procedure requires him to refer to extramental entities. Hume does not, and need not, present the case as one in which a person has encountered *external objects* A–L and N–Z and somehow comes by the idea M. The case is of a person who has had such-and-such impressions, *classified according to the criterial use of the Copy Principle*, not according to external causes of such impressions. Doing otherwise would violate Hume’s own sanction on hypothesizing anything about the source of such impressions, and would be wholly unnecessary.

The problem with this objection is that it presupposes that the force and vivacity reading and the Copy Principle reading interpret Hume as being up to

the *same kind* of activity, but employing different means of achieving it; but this is not the case. That is, in order to make this objection, the proponents of the force and vivacity reading would have to portray Hume as using force and vivacity to provide an *explanatory account* of our pre-theoretical notion of the distinction between impressions and ideas. The problem with their doing this is that force and vivacity are clearly *part of* this pre-theoretical, intuitive picture, whereas the Copy Principle is not. We can explain Hume's use of some criteria other than the Copy Principle by pointing to the pre-theoretical, intuitive picture. The proponents of the force and vivacity reading, first of all, have nothing specific to point to at all (as we can point to force and vivacity), and, secondly, have no explanation of why there ought *to be* anything other than force and vivacity that might be used in this way.

Now that we are fairly clear on what the Copy Principle is, and the sense in which it grounds the distinction between impressions and ideas, our next task is to return to those bits of text that seemed to support the force and vivacity reading, and see if we can account for them in some other way. We have already encountered a paradigm example of the most important class of such texts. It is the following:

All the perceptions of the mind are of two kinds, *viz.* impressions and ideas, which differ from each other only in their different degrees of force and vivacity. (T 1.3.7.5; SBN 96)

Remember that the problem here is supposed to be that if it is literally true that the *only* difference between impressions and ideas is their degree of force and vivacity, then the only *candidate* available for that which makes a mental entity an impression or an idea is degree of force and vivacity; nothing else could possibly do the job. The key here, of course, is to see that this superficial reading of the passage is *not* literally true: that the only difference between impressions and ideas is their degree of force and vivacity. This much is not controversial. Hume clearly holds that the Causal Condition of the Copy Principle is *true*, even if he does not take it that that principle grounds the distinction between impressions and ideas. So, at the very least, impressions, *as a matter of fact*, differ from ideas in their causal origins. If, however, they differ in this way, then the above quotation ought not to be taken as ruling out this difference as a candidate for what grounds the distinction between them. Rather, we ought to read Hume as here working with something like a bounded quantifier. The "only" in this passage is not meant to range over *all* the qualities that a perception might have, but only the *non-relational* non-essential ones. So we ought to read this passage, and ones like it, as claiming that ideas and impressions (considered individually, or non-relationally) differ only in their different degrees of force and vivacity. Of course they differ in other ways,

but all of these other ways are relational differences, which are not what Hume is focusing on in such passages.

The next class of texts that seems to need explanation is one in which Hume appears to draw the impression/idea distinction in a way that is clearly other than via the Copy Principle. These are a kind of mirror to the texts that we earlier presented by way of objection to the force and vivacity reading. Remember that there we presented texts in which Hume explicitly writes that the degree of force and vivacity of an idea could be equal to that of an impression. The parallel text here would be one in which Hume explicitly writes that there could be some idea that was not a copy of any other mental entity. We have, of course, just encountered such a class of texts: those concerning the missing shade of blue, in which Hume is *defending* the Copy Principle. On our construal, however, these texts do not lend support to the force and vivacity reading, because they do not in fact undermine Hume's use of the Copy Principle to ground the distinction between impressions and ideas. Remember that according to our reading of these texts, this is a distinction that we can intuitively make—via symptomatic features of the difference (force and vivacity), or paradigm examples, and so forth—but which is not *defined* by any of these. The Copy Principle comes into play as first, an empirical fact about the mental entities so classified, and then as that which actually underlies this distinction. This entitles Hume to say, as he does, both that as a matter of empirical fact all ideas are copies of impressions, and that, as it turns out, impressions and ideas just *are* originals and copies, respectively.

By way of concluding, I will delineate some of the advantages that the reading of Hume's impression/idea distinction so far presented enjoys. Firstly, as we have already seen, reading Hume's distinction in this way enables us to make sense of the passages in his works in which he is clearly using some criterion other than force and vivacity to distinguish impressions from ideas, and I contend that this exegetical gain does not have any correspondingly significant exegetical cost. Secondly, this reading slightly lightens the burden that Hume has traditionally been seen as laying on force and vivacity. That is, Hume uses degree of force and vivacity in other places in his system to account for various other mental phenomena (for instance, belief, time order, and so forth) and the more work this has to do the less plausible it is that it can do it all. Therefore, by reading the impression/idea distinction using the Copy Principle we free up degree of force and vivacity to do more work elsewhere.

Lastly, there is a large body of contemporary literature surrounding what might be called causal theories of conceptual content (think Dretske, Fodor, Millikan, and so forth). Reading Hume's distinction using the two-part Copy Principle it becomes quite natural also to use this principle to fix the content of impressions and ideas.²⁰ (This line would start with the rudimentary claim that an impression or idea is *about* that which in its causal history it exactly resembles.) This, in turn,

places Hume's system right alongside contemporary participants in this debate as another systematic account/research program to be reckoned with—with its attendant advantages (for example, resemblance as a solution to so-called disjunction problems) and disadvantages (having to cash out the notion of resemblance, and so forth). Of course, as we noted earlier, Hume is not one for the external world, so on *strictly* Humean principles it would turn out—taking this line—that ideas are all and only of impressions, and that impressions have no intentional content. This seems to be both a thoroughly Humean line to take on such things, but also a bit troubling. The unsettling feeling of this line, however, is—one supposes—of a piece with that of denying the sense in talk of an external world. Thus is the price of being a *strict* Humean; one can always be less strict.

NOTES

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1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) and Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896). Quotations from the *Treatise* are cited in both the Norton edition (by paragraph number) and the Selby-Bigge edition (by page number).

2 Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977) and Harold Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1999) are both proponents of the first option: the force and vivacity interpretation. Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971) reads Hume as employing force and vivacity in this way, but argues that to make Hume's theory plausible we must switch to using an objective-realm interpretation. Stephen Everson, "The Difference Between Feeling and Thinking," *Mind* 37.387 (1988): 401–13, recognizing the difficulty with all of these approaches, reinterprets force and vivacity functionally and argues that this reading avoids many of the usual problems with the force and vivacity reading. Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997) argues that the force and vivacity interpretation must be supplemented with one that makes crucial use of the Copy Principle, and that both criteria are important for understanding Hume's distinction. Georges Dicker, *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics* (London: Routledge, 1998) argues that Hume is himself ambiguous on the point, and that neither kind of reading is particularly fruitful in any case.

3 This is not meant to imply that the force and vivacity reading and the Copy Principle reading are the only two interpretations available. Rather than discuss all the alternatives, I will focus on showing the disadvantages of the former and the advantages of the latter. One such alternative that is worth mentioning is that which draws the

impression/idea distinction by relying on an intuitive feeling/thinking distinction. Suffice it to say that my position is that insofar as the feeling/thinking distinction is an intuitive one, it is involved in the pre-theoretical sorting of mental entities which provides the explanandum of which the Copy Principle is the explanans.

4 Ruth Garrett Millikan gives a much more robust and accurate account of copying in *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984), 19–23. It would be an interesting topic of investigation to see how Hume's account of the impression/idea distinction would fare using that account of copying.

5 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000) and Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (1902; Oxford, 1972). Quotations from the *Treatise* are cited in both the Norton edition (by paragraph number) and the Selby-Bigge edition (by page number).

6 This, of course, supposes that we have some intuitive, pre-theoretical grasp on the distinction between impressions and ideas. I will argue later that this is a claim on which Hume heavily relies.

7 There are, of course, moves that can be made to save the force and vivacity reading in the face of such examples. The point here is just that such examples, even if surmountable, give us some reason to look for other ways of drawing this distinction.

8 It is important to note that Bennett does not read Hume as drawing the distinction this way (he is a force and vivacity proponent *qua* Hume interpreter), but thinks that if Hume's theory is to be at all taken seriously, we must revise his stance here for him in just this way.

9 If, on the other hand, being available to introspection does not imply infallibility, but only that what is mental can appear to consciousness, then this condition is, of course, fine.

10 At least with regard to *simple* impressions and ideas.

11 In what follows, I will be drawing on Don Garrett's explication of the Copy Principle in *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, 41–57.

12 Notice that this rules out, at least in the vast majority of cases, that a complex idea is a *copy*. A more precise formulation would instead be that a complex idea is an idea composed of simple ideas that are themselves copies of simple impressions. I think this is exactly what Hume wants to say about complex ideas. I am indebted to Peter Millican for prompting me to make this clearer.

13 Kant, for instance, later rejects this *ontological* conception of accounting for meaning.

14 Ruth Garrett Millikan, *Language, Thought and Other Biological Categories* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1984).

15 I am indebted to a reviewer at *Hume Studies* for prompting me to make this clearer.

16 It is important to be clear here. It is not the case that focusing our attention on this distinction is the *only* work that is to be done by force and vivacity in Hume's system.

Clearly it is not. Force and vivacity also play a crucial role in Hume's theory of belief, his theory of judgment (insofar as he offers one), and so on. It is simply that force and vivacity, in the context of drawing the distinction between impressions and ideas is not criterial, but symptomatic.

17 This is a point that Don Garrett also makes in *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy*, 43–54.

18 As we will see momentarily, the missing shade of blue is an example of an idea that has not been copied from any impression. It is, however, also an idea that *might as well have been* copied from some idea. Hume has a story to tell about how the idea of the missing shade of blue could arise from impressions of neighboring shades of blue. Part of Hume's point about necessary connection is that no such story could possibly be told about it.

19 It follows from our construal of the impression/idea distinction that if we are to have an *idea* of an impression of reflection—say of anger—then that idea will have to exactly resemble the impression and be caused by it. Certainly, the second of these conditions is unproblematic—ideas *are* caused by the impressions of which they are copies on Hume's account—but the second condition might be thought to be more troublesome. It would seem to follow from our account that any idea of anger that we form itself *has* all the properties that our actual *feeling* (impression) of anger has. Our idea of anger, that is, must itself be an *instance* of anger as well.

To answer the above worry, then, ideas of impressions of reflection *do* share the essential characteristics of those impressions. Such must be admitted by *any* strictly Humean account of impressions and ideas. (For instance, the force and vivacity account will say that these share their intrinsic characteristics, and only differ in their degree of force and vivacity.) Furthermore, any strictly Humean account will also have to admit that the only differences between such an idea and its corresponding impression are differences in force and vivacity, and differences in relational properties. The only difference between the current interpretation and, say, the force and vivacity interpretation is that the current one takes these claims that Hume *clearly* takes as *at least* truths about impressions and ideas, and treats them also as playing a theoretical explanatory, and thus, criterial role in constituting the distinction between such perceptions. Such an objection, insofar as it is damaging, is equally damaging to all construals of Hume, as it is an objection to something that Hume *clearly* takes to be a true thesis of his.

20 Cf. Jerry Fodor, *Hume Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003).