

# Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

## David Hume, 1711-1776

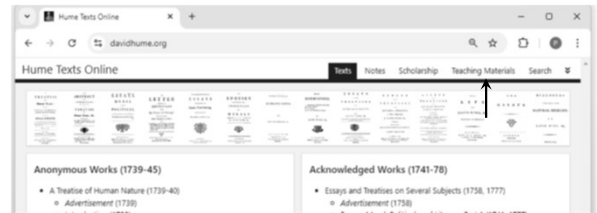


2. *Force and Vivacity, Belief, Separability and Association of Ideas*

Peter Millican  
Hertford College, Oxford

37

## Reminder of Learning Resources



### ■ See in particular:

- “Overview of *Treatise* Book 1 Part 1”
- “Notes on Hume on Ideas and Impressions”
- “Notes on Hume’s Copy Principle”

38

## Last Time ...

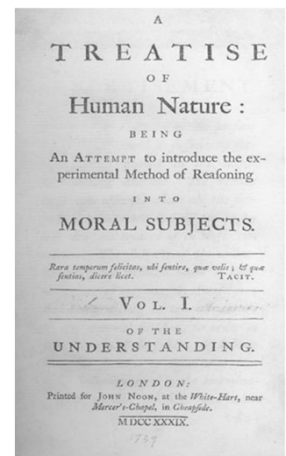
- We saw how Hume’s conceptual empiricism follows Locke in taking all of our ideas to come through *sensation* or *reflection*. However:
  - Hume’s terminology of *impressions* and *ideas* helps to clarify the issue, though we shall soon see problems in his notion of *force and vivacity*.
  - Hume takes *feelings* (not mental operations) to be the paradigmatic objects of ideas of reflection.
- Hume’s arguments for his Copy Principle (and his complacent assumption of the simple/complex distinction) are not entirely convincing.

39

39

## 2(a)

## Force and Vivacity



40

## Distinguishing Impressions and Ideas

- When first introducing his distinction between impressions and ideas, Hume seems to base it mainly on *force*, *vivacity*, or *liveliness*:

“All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS. The difference betwixt these consists in the force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the soul, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those ... which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions* ...” (T 1.1.1.1).

41

41

## Starting from Internalism?

- Hume seems to want to define the impression/idea distinction in terms of their *internally perceptible* qualities rather than their causes (e.g. whether they’re caused by external objects).
- Perhaps – as with his “unknown causes” comment about impressions of sensation (T 1.1.2.1) – he wants to remain sceptically non-committal (e.g. about the existence of an external world), and to avoid dogmatic commitments.
- But he also has a deeper theoretical motivation, deriving from his theory of *belief* ...

42

42

# Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

## Why Emphasise “Force and Vivacity?”

- Hume is looking for a way that ideas can differ from impressions while still having the same *content* (thus respecting his Copy Principle that ideas are literally *copies* of impressions).
  - T 1.3.7.6: “the same idea can only be vary’d by a variation of its degrees of force and vivacity”
- Hume emphasises this when developing his theory of belief:
  - If I believe proposition *P*, and you don’t, the same ideas must be involved, or it wouldn’t be the same proposition (see discussion at T 1.3.7.3-4 ).

43

43

## Distinguishing Belief from Mere Conception

- Hume’s theory of belief defines it (at T 1.3.7.5) in terms of force and vivacity or “liveliness”, typically derived from an associated impression:
  - “An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin’d, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION.”
- This liveliness is shared also by memories (T 1.1.3.1, 1.3.5.3 ff.) – “Thus it appears, that the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present.” (T 1.3.5.7)

44

44

## Looking Ahead to Induction

- Hume will later (in T 1.3.6-8) argue that whenever we draw an inference from observed to unobserved matters of fact (what we now call “induction”), we do this by *custom* or *habit*.
- For example, after seeing *A*’s repeatedly followed by *B*’s, our ideas of *A* and *B* become associated, and hence when we next see an *A*, we habitually expect a *B* to follow.
- *The vivacity of the sense-impression of A is conveyed by association to enliven our idea of B, and we accordingly expect B to follow.*

45

45

## A “Hydraulic” Theory of Belief

- “I wou’d willingly establish it as a general maxim in the science of human nature, *that when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity.*” (T 1.3.8.2)
- T 1.3.8 gives various “experiments” to illustrate how force and vivacity can be conveyed from impressions to their “associated ideas”, confirming this as a general phenomenon of human nature.

46

46

## A Hydraulic Theory of Probability

- Suppose I toss a six-sided die ...
  - “When ... the thought is determin’d by the causes to consider the dye as falling and turning up one of its sides, the chances present all these sides as equal, and make us consider every one of them, one after another, as alike probable ... The determination of the thought is common to all; but no more of its force falls to the share of any one, than what is suitable to its proportion with the rest. ’Tis after this manner the original impulse, and consequently the vivacity of thought, arising from the causes, is divided and split in pieces by the intermingled chances.” (T 1.3.11.12)

47

47

## Doubts about Force and Vivacity

- Hume seems to recognise that relying on “force and vivacity” to distinguish impressions from ideas is problematic:
  - “in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: [And] it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas.” (T 1.1.1.1)
- Compare, for example, dreaming of an attack of spiders, with watching paint dry! (But note that a feeling of *fear* would be a *reflective impression*, quite separate from the imagined visual ideas.)

48

48

# Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

## ■ There are also other difficulties:

- A fictional story can far be more “vivacious”, at least superficially, than a dull historical account (perhaps Hume realised this at T 1.3.10.10, added in 1740?).
- Is a change in “force and vivacity” really consistent with preserving the same idea? Suppose our *idea* of a *dull* red door acquires more vivacity: couldn’t that become the *idea* of a *bright* red door, rather than *belief* in a dull red door? How can we distinguish between these two outcomes?
- Coming to believe something looks more like a change of our *attitude* to an idea than like a change in the “force and vivacity” of the idea itself (recall the concern expressed in Lecture 1, slide 14).

49

49

## Is “Force and Vivacity” Univocal?

- Hume’s hydraulic theory seems to assume that a single dimension of “force and vivacity” can capture the differences between:
  - An impression of X (most forceful/vivacious)
  - A memory of X (between impression and idea)
  - A belief or expectation of X (a vivacious idea)
  - Mere contemplation of X (least forceful/vivacious)
- Dauer (1999) suggests that this implausibility later pushed Hume away from the hydraulic model, which does not feature in the *Enquiry*.

50

50

## Symptoms of Unease?

- In the 1740 Appendix, Hume seems to evince some discomfort with his account:

“An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea ... And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*. ... ’tis impossible to explain perfectly this feeling or manner of conception. We may make use of words, that express something near it. But its true and proper name is *belief*, which is a term than every one sufficiently understands ...”

(T 1.3.7.7; see also T 1.3.10.10, as noted in slide 49 above)

51

51

## Retreating from the Theory

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume seems to retreat from the hydraulic theory:

“Were we to attempt a *definition* of this sentiment, we should, perhaps, find it ... impossible ... BELIEF is the true and proper name of this feeling; ... It may not, however, be improper to attempt a *description* of this sentiment; ... I say then, that belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain.” (E 5.12)

Probable belief, as in the case of a die, arises from “an inexplicable contrivance of nature” (E 6.3).

52

52

## Phenomenological or Functional?

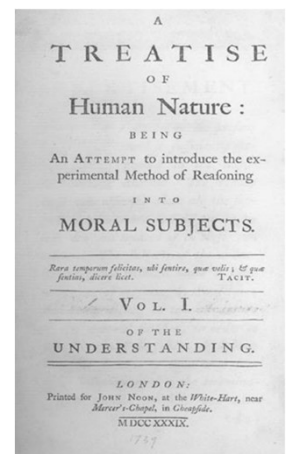
- Trends in philosophy are often mirrored by trends in interpretation, especially to defend a revered figure! Accordingly, Hume’s “Force and Vivacity” has been interpreted (e.g. by Everson 1988) as *externalist* and *functional* rather than *internalist* and *phenomenological*.
- Marušić (2010) argues strongly on the other side, citing Hume’s emphasis (e.g. in paragraphs 7-9 of the *Appendix* to the *Treatise*) on *feeling* as *causally* key to the functional difference between belief and mere conception. It looks as though the difference in “feeling” is more fundamental.

53

53

2(b)

## The Separability Principle



54

# Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

## The “Liberty of the Imagination”

- We have already seen that some ideas are complex, and can be divided imaginatively into components:  
An apple has a particular shape, a colour, a taste, a smell ... Its shape is also complex ...
- We can also *put ideas together* in new ways:  
gold + mountain = golden mountain.
- At T 1.1.3.4 Hume refers to this “*liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas*” as his “second principle”.

55

55

## The Separability Principle (SP)

- Later, that relatively modest “second principle” seems to morph into what is commonly called Hume’s Separability Principle, which has strikingly paradoxical results later in the *Treatise*:  
“We have observ’d [apparently at T 1.1.3.4], that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And ... these propositions are equally true in the *inverse*, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different.” (T 1.1.7.3)

56

56

## Arguing for the Separability Principle

- Hume’s argument for the Separability Principle is extremely cursory:  
“For how is it possible we can separate what is not distinguishable, or distinguish what is not different?” (T 1.1.7.3)
- This makes the Separability Principle look trivially true, but Hume will later use it to maintain, for example, that a perception (i.e. an impression or idea) could exist quite independently of any perceiver.

57

57

## Taking Separability Too Far?

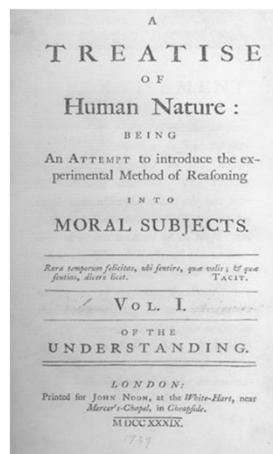
- This happens at T 1.4.5.5, where Hume considers the standard (e.g. Descartes, Chambers) definition of a substance as *something which may exist by itself*:  
“this definition agrees to every thing, that can possibly be conceiv’d; ... Whatever is clearly conceiv’d may exist; ... every thing, which is different, is distinguishable, and every thing which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination. My conclusion ... is, that since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider’d as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance.”

58

58

2(c)

## Association of Ideas



59

## Locke on the Association of Ideas

- Hume sometimes expresses great enthusiasm about the association of ideas (e.g. A 35), but this is in striking contrast to Locke’s attitude:  
“[3] this sort of Madness ... [4] this ... Weakness to which all Men are so liable, ... a Taint which so universally infects Mankind ... [5] ... there is [a] Connexion of *Ideas* wholly owing to Chance or Custom; *Ideas* that in themselves are not at all of kin, come to be so united in some Mens Minds that 'tis very hard to separate them ...”  
(Locke, *Essay* II xxxiii 3-5)

60

60

# Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

## Chambers' *Cyclopaedia* (1728)

"ASSOCIATION of *Ideas*, is where two or more Ideas, constantly and immediately follow or succeed one another in the Mind, so that one shall almost infallibly produce the other ... Where there is a real Affinity or Connection in Ideas, it is the excellency of the Mind, to be able to collect, compare, and range them in Order, in its Enquiries: But where there is none, nor any Cause to be assign'd for their accompanying each other, but what is owing to mere Accident or Habit; ... this unnatural *Association* becomes a great Imperfection, and is generally speaking, a main Cause of Error, or wrong Deductions in reasoning."

61

61

"Thus the Idea of Goblins and Sprights, has really no more Affinity with Darkness than with Light; and yet let a foolish Maid inculcate these often on the Mind of a Child, and raise them there together, 'tis possible he shall never be able to separate them again so long as he lives, but Darkness shall ever bring with it those frightful Ideas."

"Such wrong combinations of Ideas, Mr. *Lock* shews, are a great Cause of the irreconcilable Opposition between the different sects of Philosophy and Religion: ... some loose and independent Ideas are by Education, Custom, and the constant Din of their Party, so coupled in their Minds, that they always appear there together: These they can no more separate in their Thoughts, than if they were but one Idea, ... This ... is the Foundation of the greatest, and almost of all the Errors in the World." (p. 161)

62

62

## Hume on the Association of Ideas

- Despite "the liberty of the imagination", there is a pattern to our thoughts:

"all simple ideas may be separated by the imagination, and may be united again in what form it pleases ... [yet there is] some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another" (T 1.1.4.1)

- Hume calls this "a gentle force" which explains why languages "so nearly correspond to each other" in the complex ideas that are represented within their vocabulary.

63

63

## Three Principles of Association

- Ideas may be associated in three ways:

"The qualities, from which this association arises ... are three, viz. RESEMBLANCE, CONTIGUITY in time or place, and CAUSE and EFFECT." (T 1.1.4.1)

- Association is "a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world" has remarkable effects like gravity in the physical world (T 1.1.4.6).

– The complex ideas arising from such association "may be divided into *Relations*, *Modes*, and *Substances*" (T 1.1.4.7). Hume then discusses these three categories in turn, in T 1.1.5 and 1.1.6.

64

64

## Natural and Philosophical Relations

- T 1.1.5 starts with a distinction between two senses of the word "relation". In one sense, we think of things as *related* when the idea of one *naturally* leads the thought to the other.
- So the "*natural relations*" are those that correspond to our associative tendencies – resemblance, contiguity, cause and effect.
- But when *philosophers* talk about "relations", they include *any arbitrary* "subject of comparison", even when it doesn't give rise to association.
- We'll return to Hume's theory of relations later. For now, we resume our focus on *association*.

65

65

## Custom and Induction

- As already noted (slide 45) Hume will argue in T 1.3.6-8 that *all inference to the unobserved* depends on *custom*, by which we expect for the future what we have observed in the past.
- So Hume – in contrast to Locke and Chambers – takes a very positive attitude to custom:

"Tis not, therefore, reason, which is the guide of life, but custom." (A 16)

"Custom, then, is the great guide of human life. It is that principle alone, which renders our experience useful to us ..." (E 5.6)

66

66

# Oxford Lectures on David Hume, 2024-25

## Custom and Association of Ideas

- At T 1.3.7.6, Hume appears to refer to “custom” as “a principle of association”.
- Yet there is a big difference between the sort of association that is merely “a gentle force” (T 1.1.4.1) tending to leads our thoughts from one idea to another, and what will later turn out to be custom’s irresistibility (e.g. at T 1.3.9.7, 1.4.1.7 and 1.4.4.1).
- There is also another fundamental difference, in that custom involves *inference to something unobserved*, whereas mere association typically involves *flow of a train of thought to something previously observed*. Hume is much clearer about this in his *Enquiry*.

67

67

## Custom and Association in the first *Enquiry*

- In the *Enquiry*, Hume treats *custom* as clearly distinct from *association of ideas* by causation.
  - *Custom* operates when, having previously seen *A* followed by *B* repeatedly and then seeing *A*, I *infer* that *B* will follow.
  - *Association of ideas by causation* operates when, having come to the belief that *A* and *B* are causally related, my thought of *A* leads me to thought of *B*. This will not usually involve any specific *inference*.

68

68

“No one can doubt but causation has the same influence as the other two relations of resemblance and contiguity. Superstitious people are fond of the reliques of saints and holy men, for the same reason, that they seek after types or images, in order to enliven their devotion, and give them a more intimate and strong conception of those exemplary lives, which they desire to imitate.” (E 5.18)

“Suppose, that the son of a friend, who had been long dead or absent, were presented to us; it is evident, that this object would instantly revive its correlative idea, and recal to our thoughts all past intimacies and familiarities, in more lively colours than they would otherwise have appeared to us. This is another phænomenon, which seems to prove the principle above-mentioned [i.e. that the relation of *causation* gives rise to association of ideas and consequent increase in vivacity]. (E 5.19)

69

69

“We may observe, that, in these phænomena, the belief of the correlative object is always presupposed; without which the relation could have no effect. The influence of the picture supposes, that we believe our friend to have once existed. Contiguity to home can never excite our ideas of home, unless we believe that it really exists. Now I assert, that this belief, where it reaches beyond the memory or senses, is of a similar nature, and arises from similar causes, with the transition of thought and vivacity of conception here explained.” (E 5.20)

- Thus he argues that *custom* is an associational principle, “analogous” to *association of ideas* (E 5.13), but his carefully chosen examples make clear that he is distinguishing, rather than conflating them.

70

70

## Religion and Association

- Although in the *Treatise* Hume conflates *custom* and *association*, he generally sees the former as epistemologically essential, and the latter as often leading to confusion and fallacy. He particularly highlights examples occurring in religion:
  - T 1.3.8.4 The “mummeries” of Roman Catholicism enhance belief in saints (etc.) by perception of statues and associational *resemblance*.
  - T 1.3.8.6 Relics have a similar effect, associated to saints through *causation*.
  - T 1.3.9.9 *Contiguity* enhances the belief of pilgrims to Mecca or the Holy Land.

71

71

## Hume’s Attitude to Association

- Sometimes, Hume seems extremely positive:
  - Association is “a kind of *ATTRACTION*, which in the mental world” has remarkable effects like gravity in the physical world (T 1.1.4.6).
  - “if any thing can intitle the author to so glorious a name as that of an *inventor*, ’tis the use he makes of the principle of the association of ideas, which enters into most of his philosophy” (A 35)
- Hume indeed entirely approves of *custom*, as “the great guide of human life”. But nevertheless, he retains much of the general suspicion of *mere* association that we saw in Locke and Chambers.

72

72