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Faint Impressions, Forceful Ideas

Hume's Impression/Idea Distinction

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Abstract

A natural reading of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas is that impressions are forceful perceptions whereas ideas are faint. A problem emerges, however, when Hume countenances the possibility of faint impressions and forceful ideas. In this paper, I attempt a resolution to the problem. I argue that Hume characterizes impressions and ideas intensionally and extensionally, and sometimes uses the term in only one of the two senses. I argue that Hume intensionally defines impressions and ideas as forceful perceptions and weak perceptions, respectively, but takes these to be extensionally equivalent to original and copied perceptions, respectively. Hume recognizes that his two characterizations—the intensional and extensional—don't perfectly match up, and that there are exceptions to the purported equivalences (the exceptions being disease, sleep, madness, and enthusiasm). Nonetheless, I argue that Hume's willing to proceed with his definitions.

1 Introduction

Hume opens Book 1 of the *Treatise* by distinguishing between two kinds of perceptions. He writes that:

> 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 degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind, and make their way into our thought or consciousness. Those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and under this name I comprehend all our sensations,

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> passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul. By *ideas* I mean the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning [...].
>
> *T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1, emphasis in the original[1]

A natural reading of this passage is that Hume divides perceptions into two distinct kinds: impressions and ideas. According to this reading, he defines

> (A1) 'impression' as 'forceful perception', and
> (A2) 'idea' as 'faint perception'[2]

As is the case with definitions, (A1) entails that

> (i) a perception is an impression ↔ it is a forceful perception,

while (A2) entails that

> (ii) a perception is an idea ↔ it is a weak perception.

In addition, Hume's comments at *T* 1.1.1.1 seem to suggest that a perception's degree of force and vivacity resides on a continuum, such that forceful and faint perceptions constitute opposing ends of that continuum.[3] We can capture this observation as follows:

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1 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature.* Fate Norton, D. F. & Norton, M. J. (ed.), 2000. Oxford: Clarendon Press, cited as *T* followed by book, part, section, and paragraph number; and to David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature.* Selby-Bigge, L. A. (ed.) & Nidditch, P. H. (ed.), 1978. 2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press., cited as *SBN* followed by page number.

2 Hume uses many terms to designate forceful and faint perceptions. For instance, in the case of impressions, he sometimes speaks of 'violent' (*T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1), 'lively' (ibid.), 'strong' (*EHU* 2.9; *SBN* 21), and 'vivacious' (ibid.) perceptions; whereas in the case of ideas, he sometimes speaks of 'weak' (*T* 1.1.7.5; *SBN* 19), 'dull' (*EHU* 2.2; *SBN* 17), or 'less lively' perceptions (*EHU* 2.3; *SBN* 18). *EHU* abbreviates David Hume. *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding.* Beauchamp, T. L. (ed.). 2002. Oxford: Clarendon Press, cited according to section and paragraph number; and *SBN* abbreviates *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals.* Selby-Bigge, L. A. (ed.) & Nidditch, P. H. (rev.), 2nd ed. 1975. Oxford: Oxford University Press, cited by page number.

3 There are unanswered questions in the vicinity here. Since Hume presumably wishes to distinguish between two exhaustive and exclusive classes of perceptions, is there some point on this continuum which demarcates each class? An alternative interpretation is that Hume intends that a perception's degree of force and vivacity should be understood relatively: impressions are more forceful *as compared to* their corresponding ideas, and ideas are less forceful *as compared to* their corresponding impressions (cf. *T* 1.1.7.5; *SBN* 19). On this reading there is no point on the continuum which demarcates each class. I shall not dwell on such questions here, however.

(iii) a perception is forceful ↔ it is not faint.

But Hume then complicates things. For he soon concedes that:

(iv) some impressions are faint, and
(v) some ideas are forceful.

He writes that though the "common degrees" of impressions and ideas are easily distinguished, it can happen that "in particular instances they may very nearly approach to each other." Thus,

> [...] in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions: As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1

Thus my dreaming that I have just won the Pulitzer Prize, for instance, may involve a very vivid and clear idea, despite the fact that it is only an idea and not an impression. In a similar vein, Barry Stroud (1977, 28–29) introduces the example of a detective suddenly realizing the fire poker is lying to the left-hand side of the fireplace (remembering that the accused is left-handed). This realization, an idea, may very well be more vivid and lively than the detective's initial impression. The problem, however, is that (i)–(v) are inconsistent: (i)–(v) cannot all be true. Once more, the problem is not unique to Hume's earlier work, for he reiterates these claims some nine years later, in the first *Enquiry*. There we find him claiming that

> [...] all the perceptions of the mind [divide] into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated *thoughts* or *ideas.* The other species want a name in our language, and in most others ... Let us, therefore, use a little freedom, and call them impressions [...] By the term *impression*, then, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above-mentioned.
>
> *EHU* 2.3; *SBN* 18, emphasis in the original

However, as per the above, when the mind is disordered by disease or madness, our ideas may be rendered "altogether undistinguishable" from our impressions (*EHU* 2.1; *SBN* 17). Consequently, the inconsistency witnessed in the *Treatise* reemerges in the *Enquiry*.

This has led many commentators to put forward alternative characterizations of the distinction between impressions and ideas. Jonathan Bennett and Georges Dicker, for instance, while recognizing the role force and vivacity play in Hume's explicit characterizations, argue that Hume must equate impressions with perceptions of an objectively existing world. David Landy, in turn, has argued that the nature of the distinction is best captured by the copy principle, claiming that Hume defines 'impression' as 'original perception' and 'idea' as 'copied perception'. In what follows, however, I shall argue that neither view gets matters quite right. Accordingly, in Section 2, I begin working toward a solution to the problem by noting a general pattern that is operative throughout *T* 1.1.1. This pattern involves Hume's first making a claim of universal scope, followed by exceptions, only then to proceed with the original contention on the assumption that it holds "in general" (*T* 1.1.1.5; *SBN* 3). This pattern, I argue, reemerges in an important passage in Book 2 of the *Treatise*. In Section 3, therefore, I use this passage to illustrate how Hume conceives of his task when proffering a definition; in particular, I show how Hume puts forward intensional *as well as* extensional definitions of his terms. Finally, in Sections 4 and 5, I apply these results to the distinction between impressions and ideas. I argue that Hume's intensional definitions, which are conducted in terms of definitions by genus and difference, are presented in terms of force and vivacity. However, Hume also offers definitions by subclass—that is, definitions in terms of the kinds of perceptions that fall within the extension of the term. This, I contend, has important implications for how we should understand Hume's empiricist project. In particular, it supports the view that Hume regards the copy principle as nothing more than an empirical generalization. I conclude in Section 6.

2 A General Pattern at T 1.1.1

I first wish to note a general pattern that is operative throughout *T* 1.1.1 (*SBN* 1–7). The pattern is emblematic of Hume's experimental method, of his seeking to render "our principles as universal as possible" (*T* Intro. 8; *SBN* xvii). The pattern I wish to draw attention to is this: Hume first makes an initial claim of universal scope, he then identifies an exception or set of exceptions that he

takes to be rare (at times observing what holds universally in a more limited fashion), and, finally, he expresses his willingness to proceed with his initial claim despite the previously identified exceptions.

There are at least three instances of this general pattern at work in *T* 1.1.1 (*SBN* 1–7): (a) Hume's discussion of simple and complex perceptions as they pertain to the copy thesis (*T* 1.1.1.3–7; *SBN* 2–4), (b) the case of the missing shade of blue (*T* 1.1.1.10; *SBN* 5), and (c) the 'impression'/'idea' distinction (*T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1). Seeing this procedure at work in cases (a) and (b) will help shed light on case (c).

Having noted the distinction between simple and complex perceptions at *T* 1.1.1.2 (*SBN* 2), Hume seeks "to consider with the more accuracy [the] qualities and relations" (*T* 1.1.1.3; *SBN* 2) among our perceptions. He observes that impressions and ideas exactly resemble one another:

> The 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 one seems to be in a manner the reflection of the other; so that all the perceptions of the mind are double, and appear both as impressions and ideas. When I shut my eyes and think of my chamber, 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. In running over my other perceptions, I find still the same resemblance and representation. Ideas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.3; *SBN* 2.

The contention that "[i]deas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other" constitutes Hume's initial claim of universal scope. It applies to all ideas and all impressions.

Hume quickly qualifies this claim, however, observing that his initial generalization was too hasty. He has "been carry'd away too far by the first appearance" (*T* 1.1.1.4; *SBN* 3), and instead claims that he should "limit this general decision, *that all our ideas and impressions are resembling*" (ibid., emphasis in the original). The reason this generalization is too hasty is that Hume admits complex ideas—such as his ideas of Paris and the New Jerusalem—that lack exactly resembling complex impressions. His idea of the New Jerusalem, for example, "whose pavement is gold, and walls are rubies" (ibid.), is a complex idea that lacks a corresponding complex impression. He has never seen any such city.

Thus Hume initially makes a universal claim—the claim that "*all our ideas and impressions are resembling*"—and then recognizes that this is not strictly speaking correct. There are exceptions to this claim.

> I perceive, therefore, that tho' there is *in general* a great resemblance betwixt our complex impressions and ideas, yet the rule is *not universally* true, that they are exact copies of each other.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.5; *SBN* 3, emphasis mine

This passage nicely summarizes many of Hume's conclusions in *T* 1.1.1 (*SBN* 1–7). Hume consistently remains satisfied in asserting what holds *in general*, all the while noting that his *universal* claim has exceptions. Such language reoccurs in cases (b) and (c).

In the present case, however, Hume initially thinks his claim about resemblance can be modified to retain its universality. He soon claims that he has discovered a principle that does hold "without any exception" (*T* 1.1.1.5; *SBN* 3): namely, that every *simple* idea has a corresponding *simple* impression. So taken, there is indeed a "universal resemblance" (ibid.) between impressions and ideas. Hume thereby recasts his copy thesis in the following manner, claiming that "we shall here content ourselves with establishing one general proposition,

> [...] *that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*
>
> *T* 1.1.1.7; *SBN* 4, emphasis in the original

It is worth noting, however, that Hume is often content to speak of this principle in a loose way. This loose formulation involves asserting what merely holds "in general." Having noted the exceptions and having presented the modified principle in terms of simple perceptions only, Hume nonetheless puts matters as follows:

> [...] all simple ideas and impressions resemble each other; and as the complex are form'd from them, we may affirm in general, that these two species of perception are exactly correspondent.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.6; *SBN* 4

The same situation occurs in the case of the missing shade of blue. Having established the strict and universal formulation of the copy principle at *T* 1.1.1.7 (*SBN* 4), Hume yet again notes that this formulation is not strictly speaking

correct. Even when formulated in terms of corresponding simple perceptions, the copy principle has counterexamples, for a person may

> [...] from his own imagination [...] raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade [of blue], tho' it had never been convey'd to him by his senses.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.10; *SBN* 5

Accordingly,

> [...] this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always deriv'd from the correspondent impressions.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.10; *SBN* 5

Hume admits that this "exception" (*T* 1.1.1.11; *SBN* 6) or "contradictory phenomenon" (*T* 1.1.1.10; *SBN* 5) exists, but nonetheless claims that it "is so particular and singular, that 'tis scarce worth observing, and does not merit that for it alone we shou'd alter our general maxim" (ibid.). On the contrary, exceptions like the missing shade of blue "are very rare" (*T* 1.1.2.1; *SBN* 7) and do not warrant an outright abandonment of the copy thesis. Such is the general pattern that is operative throughout cases (a) and (b): Hume first makes a universal claim, notes exceptions, and then is content to assert what holds in general.[4] The third example in *T* 1.1.1 (*SBN* 1–7) is at the very start, when Hume first introduces his distinction between impressions and ideas. While the "common" degrees of these are easily distinguished, says Hume, it "sometimes" happens that they "very nearly approach [...] each other" (*T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1).

> But notwithstanding this near resemblance in a few instances, they are *in general* so very different, that no one can make a scruple to rank them under distinct heads, and assign to each a particular name to mark the difference.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1, emphasis mine

4 In highlighting the connection between Hume and Newton, Graciela De Pierris (2015, 150) emphasizes this aspect of Hume. She writes that "[t]he central idea of the Newtonian inductive method, as summarized in his Rules, is that exceptionless or nearly exceptionless universal laws are inductively derived from 'manifest qualities' of observed 'Phaenomena,' and only further observed phenomena can lead us to revise these laws". As we've seen here, Hume's content with *nearly* exceptionless principles.

As with cases (a) and (b), then, Hume is content to assert what merely holds "in general" with respect to his distinction between impressions and ideas. This is a clue we will have to make good on below.

This complacency on Hume's part is not limited to *T* 1.1.1 (*SBN* 1–7). In addition to cases (a)–(c), for instance, there is at least one further instance of this general pattern at work, one far removed from such discussions. This further instance occurs in Book 2 of the *Treatise*, and it is illustrative of what Hume is up to at *T* 1.1.1.1 (*SBN* 1) and *EHU* 2.3 (*SBN* 18). It is to this passage that I now turn.

3 Two Kinds of Definition

The pattern witnessed above reemerges in *T* 2.1.1.3 (*SBN* 276), with Hume's distinction of calm and violent impressions of reflection. As Hume's choice of names suggests, he intends a distinction characterized in terms of a perception's relative degree of force and vivacity. In short, he defines

> (vi) 'calm impression of reflection' as 'less forceful impression of reflection',

and

> (vii) 'violent impression of reflection' as 'very forceful impression of reflection'.[5]

This is Hume's official characterization of the calm/violent impression of reflection distinction. Before continuing with the passage in question, however, it will be helpful to have some terminology and examples on hand.

In his well-known textbook on logic, Patrick J. Hurley distinguishes between *extensional* and *intensional* definitions of a term. He characterizes an intensional definition as "one that assigns a meaning to a word by indicating the qualities or attributes that the word connotes" (Hurley 2015, 104). There are numerous ways in which this can be done (synonymous definition, etymological definition, and so on), but one such way is to provide a *definition by genus and difference*. Two examples of genus-difference definition which he (2015, 105) provides are

> 'Daughter' means 'female offspring', and
> 'Skyscraper' means 'very tall building'.

5 Since both calm and violent impressions of reflection are *impressions*, both will be forceful, although some will be more forceful than others.

In contrast, an extensional definition is "one that assigns a meaning to a term by indicating the members of the class that the *definiendum* denotes" (Hurley 2015, 104). Again, there are numerous ways in which this can be done (demonstrative definition, enumerative definition, and so on), and one such way is to provide a *definition by subclass*. Such definitions assign a "meaning to a term by naming subclasses of the class denoted by the term" (Hurley 2015, 105). Moreover, definitions by subclass can be either partial or complete, "[…] depending on whether the subclasses named, when taken together, include all of the members of the class or only some of them" (Hurley 2015, 105). Here are two examples of this species of definition provided by Hurley (2015, 106):

> 'Tree' means 'an oak, pine, elm, spruce, maple, and the like', and
> 'Cetacean' means 'either a whale, a dolphin, or a porpoise'.

The first definition is a partial definition by subclass, whereas the second is a complete definition by subclass. Consequently, definitions by genus/difference provide intensional definitions of their respective terms, whereas definitions by subclass provide either partial or complete extensional definitions.

Once more, this distinction is not unique to modern textbooks in logic. In their *Port Royal Logic*, for instance, Antoine Arnauld and Pierre Nicole claim the following:

> The more exact definition explains the nature of a thing by its essential attributes, of which the common one is called the *genus*, and the proper one the *difference*. Thus a human being is defined as a rational animal, the mind as a substance that thinks, the body as an extended substance, and God as the perfect being.
>
> ARNAULD AND NICOLE, *Logic*, II.16, 126

However, Arnauld and Nicole also note a distinction between *definition* and *classification*. They write that "classifications divide a whole into what it contains" and involve comprehending "the subjects included in its extension" (*Logic*, II.15, 123). Again, Arnauld and Nicole note that there are numerous ways in which this can be done, but the most pertinent for our purposes is "classifying the genus into its species" (ibid.). To this end, they provide the examples of "every substance is a body or a mind" and "every animal is a human or a beast" (ibid.).[6] Furthermore, as with Hurley, Arnauld and Nicole note that classifications may be either partial or complete. Indeed, the first "rule" of classification is to ensure that they are complete: "the classification must include

6 Note also that classification can be a species of definition. See ibid., II.16, 126.

the entire extension of the term being divided, just as even and odd include the entire extension of the term 'number,' since there is no number which is neither even nor odd" (*Logic*, 11.15, 124). With this terminology in hand, it becomes apparent that Hume intends (vi) and (vii) as definitions by genus and difference. In this case, the genus is 'impression of reflection' and the specific difference is the perception's relative degree of force and vivacity. But Hume also appears to put forward definitions by subclass for the terms 'calm impression of reflection' and 'violent impression of reflection'. When first presenting the distinction, for instance, he writes that the

> [...] reflective impressions may be divided into two kinds, *viz.* the *calm* and the *violent*. Of the first kind is the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects. Of the second are the passions of love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility. This division is far from being exact. The raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height; while those other impressions, properly call'd *passions*, may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible. But as in general the passions are more violent than the emotions arising from beauty and deformity, these impressions have been commonly distinguish'd from each other. The subject of the human mind being so copious and various, I shall here take advantage of this vulgar and specious division, that I may proceed with the greater order [...] .
>
> *T* 2.1.1.3; *SBN* 276

In this passage, Hume notes that the calm reflective impressions arise in those situations which involve "beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects," and he mentions the "raptures of poetry and music" as examples (ibid.). Accordingly, emotions which arise from music and poetry are included as subclasses in the class of calm impressions of reflection. Likewise, violent impressions of reflection involve "the passions of love and hatred, grief and joy, pride and humility" (ibid.). These latter are "properly call'd *passions*," whereas the former are *emotions* that are not strictly passions (ibid.).[7] Accordingly, Hume is presenting two distinct kinds of definition: *definitions by genus and difference* and *definitions by subclass*. In this way, he provides both *intensional* and *extensional* characterizations of the calm/violent distinction. In the previous section, we saw that Hume's procedure is to begin with a universal claim, note exceptions, and then proceed with what holds in

7 Hume sometimes uses "passion" and "emotion" interchangeably. At other times, however, he distinguishes between passions "properly call'd" (*T* 2.1.1.3; *SBN* 276) from those emotions that aren't strictly passions. I shall use these terms in the latter, more discriminating sense.

general. To the extent that Hume puts forward both intensional and extensional definitions of the calm/violent distinction, he is committed to the following two equivalences:

> (viii) a perception is a less forceful impression of reflection ↔ it is an emotion,

and

> (ix) a perception is a very forceful impression of reflection ↔ it is a passion.

In short, Hume wants to say that all calm impressions of reflection are emotions and all emotions are calm reflective impressions (this is the equivalence in [viii]); and he wants to say that all violent impressions of reflection are passions and all passions are violent impressions of reflection (this is the equivalence in [ix]). In other words, he wants to identify an extensional equivalence between both of kinds of definition.

But Hume explicitly denies (viii) and (ix). He states that "[t]his division is far from being exact" (ibid.). In other words, it is *not* the case that the set of very forceful reflective impressions is coextensive with the set of passions, and it is *not* the case that the set of less forceful reflective impressions is coextensive with the set of emotions. In his words "the raptures of poetry and music frequently rise to the greatest height" (*T* 1.1.1.3; *SBN* 276) (emotions, as opposed to passions properly called, are frequently violent)

> [...] while those other impressions, properly call'd *passions*, may decay into so soft an emotion, as to become, in a manner, imperceptible.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.3; *SBN* 276

Consequently, the universal equivalences in (viii) and (ix) do not hold.

But never mind, says Hume, for he is content to assert what merely holds in general: "But as *in general* the passions are more violent than the emotions arising from beauty and deformity", we may "take advantage of this vulgar and specious division" (ibid., emphasis mine). Hume calls this a "vulgar" division because the relevant "impressions have been *commonly* distinguish'd from each other" (ibid., emphasis mine), and it is a "specious" or "inexact" division because the equivalences in (viii) and (ix) are not strictly speaking true. In short, the equivalences hold generally, but not universally.[8]

8 Berkeley (1998, 1.51.) once famously remarked that we should "[...] think with the learned ... and speak with the vulgar". Here, it appears, Hume is willing to *think* with them as well.

We can sum up the conclusions of this section as follows. Hume wants to draw a contrast between two distinct kinds of perceptions by defining a set of terms, 'm' and 'n', by way of a distinction between 'a' and 'b'. (He wants to define 'calm impression of reflection' and 'violent impression of reflection' in terms of 'less forceful impression of reflection' and 'very forceful impression of reflection', respectively.) But he also wants to say—although he will soon make concessions—that anything's being a is extensionally equivalent to its being x, and anything's being b is extensionally equivalent to its being y, such that the contrast between 'a' and 'b' is also a contrast between 'x' and 'y'. (He wants to say that the terms 'calm impression of reflection' and 'violent impression of reflection' pick out the classes of emotions and passions, respectively.) But he denies, strictly speaking, any such equivalence. Nonetheless, as we have seen, he is willing to proceed with the *nearly* exceptionless equivalences.[9] Hume's discussion of impressions and ideas at *T* 1.1.1.1 (*SBN* 1) and *EHU* 2.3 (*SBN* 18) betrays a similar approach. Hume, I will argue, provides *definitions by genus and difference* of the terms 'impression' and 'idea' in terms of 'force' and 'vivacity'. Nonetheless, he also offers *definitions by subclass* of such terms, and wishes to claim a near extensional equivalence between his two kinds of definition. But if Hume does intend a vulgar division with respect to the impression/idea distinction, what are the relevant contrast classes—that is, what are the corresponding 'x' and 'y'? In the next two sections, I proffer an answer.

4 Hume's Extensional Definitions of "Impression" and "Idea"

As witnessed in the previous section, Hume sometimes presents definitions by genus and difference *as well as* definitions by subclass. The question remains, however, whether something similar is taking place with his impression/idea distinction, and, if so, what the relevant subclasses are. To this end, we would do well to consider Hume's presentation of the distinction in the first *Enquiry*. In the first *Enquiry*, for instance, Hume writes:

9 The question as to why Hume is willing to proceed despite such exceptions is of course an important question. Why, for instance, in the context of his impression/idea distinction, is he willing to ignore cases of disease, madness, sleep, and very violent emotions? This, unfortunately, is not a question I have the space to explore in this paper. But for some relevant recent discussions, see Ievers (2015, 3–32) and Ainslee (2015).

> *Every* one will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination. These faculties may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses; but they never can entirely reach the force and vivacity of the original sentiment.
>
> *EHU* 2.1; *SBN* 17, empasis in the original

Hume's primary focus in this passage is the vivacity of perceptions. But his interest does not merely concern the separation of perceptions into two distinct classes: forceful and faint. Rather, his primary aim is to indicate differences in vivacity as arising from *different faculties or sources.* He draws a contrast, for instance, between "what a man feels" (what a person *senses*) and what he "afterwards recalls" or "anticipates" (ibid.) in his *memory* and *imagination*. His point here is that the faculties of memory and imagination may "mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses" (ibid.). Accordingly, in this passage, Hume is presupposing a distinction between the products of sensation, on the one hand, and the products of memory and imagination, on the other.

As the preceding passage indicates, our memories and imaginings "mimic or copy" sensations; that is, they *reflect* the products of sensation. With *EHU* 2.2 (*SBN* 17), Hume expands the contrast with reflection to include passions and emotions. For instance, he writes that:

> We may observe a like distinction to run through all the other perceptions of the mind. A man, in a fit of anger, is actuated in a very different manner from one who only thinks of that emotion. If you tell me, that any person is in love, I easily understand your meaning, and form a just conception of his situation; but never can mistake that conception for the real disorders and agitations of the passion. When we reflect on our past sentiments and affections, our thought is a faithful mirror, and copies its objects truly; but the colours which it employs are faint and dull, in comparison of those in which our original perceptions were clothed. It requires no nice discernment or metaphysical head to mark the distinction between them.
>
> *EHU* 2.2; *SBN* 17

Here Hume contrasts a "fit of anger" with "one who only *thinks* of that emotion" (emphasis mine); that is, with one who merely "reflect[s]" on one's "past sentiments and affections" (ibid.). As before, then, the contrast highlighted is a

contrast with reflection. In this case, the contrast is between passion and emotion, on the one hand, and reflection on such passions and emotions, on the other.[10] Accordingly, Hume is presupposing a distinction between two distinct kinds of perceptions. First, there is the class of perceptions F such that:

> F = the set of sensations, passions, and emotions,

and second, there is the class of perceptions T such that:

> T = the set of memories and imaginings.

Consequently, underlying Hume's discussion of the impression/idea distinction is a distinction between feeling and thinking. He writes, for instance, that everyone

> [...] will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference [in vivacity] between the perceptions of the mind, when a man *feels* the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards *recalls* to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination.
>
> *EHU* 2.1; *SBN* 17, emphasis mine

Similarly, in the *Treatise* he notes that "[e]veryone of himself will readily perceive the difference [in vivacity] betwixt *feeling* and *thinking*" (*T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1, emphasis mine).[11] Stephen Everson, in an attempt to discern the nature of force and vivacity, draws a parallel between force and vivacity and the feeling/thinking distinction. Everson argues that Hume understands force and vivacity in *functional* or *causal* terms, and not in phenomenal terms: "one perception has greater force or vivacity than another if it is such as to produce a stronger effect on the mind".[12] Even if this interpretation were rejected and the phenomenal nature of force and vivacity retained (I shall remain agnostic on the point), Everson's analysis provides additional textual support for the claim

10 As we shall see, "reflection" here denotes an activity of the mind by which it arrives at ideas and should not be confused with Hume's use of "reflective impressions", which denotes a specific kind of forceful perception.

11 Hume's repeated references to "everyone" is a further indication that he intends a vulgar division. Consider also that it "will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction" (*T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1) and that it "requires no nice discernment or metaphysical head to mark the distinction between them" (*EHU* 2.2; *SBN* 17).

12 Everson (1988, 406).

that Hume connects feeling and thinking to the impression/idea distinction. I have attempted to show one such connection here. Now Hume's main aim in *EHU* 2.1–3 (*SBN* 17–18) is not to merely draw a distinction between F and T, between feeling and thinking. On the contrary, he *assumes* this distinction. Instead, his aim is to draw a connection between the source of a perception and its relative degree of liveliness. While most readers are understandably preoccupied with Hume's discussion of liveliness in these passages, it is important to not miss the presupposed contrast between feeling and thinking, for here Hume is implicitly putting forward his definitions by subclass. Namely, he is presupposing:

(S1) 'impression' $=_{df}$ 'sensation, passion, or emotion', and
(S2) 'idea' $=_{df}$ 'memory or imagining'.

In fact, Hume makes these definitions by subclass quite explicit when initially characterizing the impression/idea distinction. He writes that

> [...] [t]hose perceptions, which enter with most force and violence, we may name *impressions*; and *under this name I comprehend all our sensations, passions, and emotions* [...]
>
> *T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1, emphasis mine

and when he writes that impressions are the "more lively perceptions, *when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will*" (*EHU* 2.3; *SBN* 18, emphasis mine). Similarly, ideas are the "faint *images* of these in thinking and reasoning" (*T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1, emphasis mine); that is, the

> [...] less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we *reflect* on any of those sensations or movements above-mentioned.
>
> *EHU* 2.3; *SBN* 18, emphasis mine

Moreover, as further evidence, consider Bennett's reasons for introducing the external world reading of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas. Bennett thinks there are important philosophical and exegetical reasons for amending Hume's view. Considering Bennett's reasons for this will provide additional support for the interpretation on offer.

First, he observes that Hume desires to use the copy thesis as a source of conceptual criticism—as "a ground for asserting that certain terms that

philosophers use are meaningless or unintelligible".[13] Hume wants to say that if the putative idea associated with a term lacks an impression from which it is supposedly derived, then the term is meaningless (*EHU* 2.9; *SBN* 21). According to Bennett, this concern with the source of an idea—with its *origin*—stems from Hume's interest in explaining meaning as consisting in a person's competence in relating words to (a) other words and (b) to the world. In short, Hume wants to claim any word lacking a basis in the world—in experience, in impressions—is semantically bankrupt. But when we understand impressions and ideas in terms of force and vivacity, such that our faint perceptions (ideas) are copies of our forceful perceptions (impressions), Bennett claims the copy thesis cannot do the work Hume intends it to do. On the contrary, we can explain such motivation "[…] only if the term 'impression' as used in the copy thesis is understood in terms not of phenomenological 'vivacity', but rather of involving experience of an objective world." (Bennett 2001, 212)

The problem, however, is that

> Hume firmly denies that 'impression' is to be understood in this way, presumably because later on he will question the belief in an objective world.… But if he holds to that denial, he deprives the copy thesis of its only chance of relating intelligibly to something interesting that might be true.
>
> BENNETT 2001, 212

Accordingly, Bennett suggests that we make an important revision to Hume's characterization of the distinction. He writes,

> […] [d]espite all the evidence that 'impression' is defined in pictorial terms, and not in terms of causation or origin, we must understand the copy thesis as saying something about how ideas relate to *sensory contact with the world of material things*.
>
> BENNETT 2001, 214

According to Bennett, then, we should understand impressions as definitively involving sensory intake from the outer world. Once more, Bennett claims there is some actual evidence of this criterion of objectivity in Hume. At *T* 1.1.7.4 (*SBN* 19), for instance, Hume writes that

13 Bennett (2001, 212).

> [...] no object can appear to the senses; or in other words, that no impression can become present to the mind, without being determin'd in its degrees both of quantity and quality.
>
> *T* 1.1.7.4; *SBN* 19

Referencing this passage, Bennett writes:

> With the phrase "in other words," Hume implies that "impression" is to be defined in terms not of vividness but of sensory intake. This is not his official view about what "impression" means, and in excluding impressions of reflection, it even clashes with his view about the extension of the word. Yet it seems clear that he is somewhat drawn in the direction in which I now push him.
>
> BENNETT 2001, 214

In addition, Bennett claims that the impression/sensory intake connection is implicit in Hume's discussion of blind and deaf people (ibid.). For example, Hume has us consider

> [...] another plain and convincing phenomenon; which is, that wherever by any accident the faculties, which give rise to any impressions, are obstructed in their operations, as when one is born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas; so that there never appear in the mind the least traces of either of them.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.9; *SBN* 5

In this passage, Hume connects the availability of impressions to appropriately functioning sensory faculties, and thus Bennett argues that Hume must be assuming that impressions involve sensory intake from the outer world.

Lastly, as one final piece of evidence, Bennett argues that Hume's characterization of impressions in "pictorial terms" divorces the copy thesis from the evidence Hume uses to support it—namely, that blind and deaf people lack the relevant ideas. But there is no basis for making this association if 'impression' just means "strong perception," as opposed to sensory intake from the outer world (2001, 213). Accordingly, Bennett thinks Hume's official account of the impression/idea distinction leads to trouble, and that Hume is better off definitively connecting impressions to sensory intake from the outer world.

But therein lies a clue. Bennett feels compelled to push Hume in a certain direction, and he feels compelled in part because of Hume's own comments.

Such evidence includes (i) Hume's use of the copy thesis as a criterion of factual meaningfulness, (ii) his "in other words" comment in *T* 1.1.7.4 (*SBN* 19), (iii) his seeming identification of impressions with sensory contact when discussing blind and deaf people, and (iv) the way in which he uses this latter discussion to empirically ground the copy thesis. Consequently, Bennett provides strong textual evidence for drawing a correlation between impressions and sensations.[14] By Bennett's own admission, however, a shortcoming of this interpretation is that it excludes impressions of reflection; Hume classifies passions and emotions, for instance, and not just sensations, as impressions. But if impressions are understood in terms of sensory contact with the external world, then Bennett's account appears to leave impressions of reflection behind.

However, on the interpretation I have provided, we can avoid all of the shortcomings of the external world account while still retaining its strengths. The present interpretation, for instance, explains Hume's use of the copy thesis as a criterion of factual meaningfulness. It explains Hume's comments at *T* 1.1.7.4 (*SBN* 9), in which he claims that "no object can appear to the senses; *or in other words*, that no impression can become present to the mind [...]" (emphasis mine), as well as his appeal to blind and deaf people when defending the copy thesis. Finally, it avoids Bennett's worry that impressions of reflection will be left behind, for, on the present account, impressions are defined in part in terms of passions and emotions.[15] Consequently, there is good reason to think Hume endorses definitions by subclass (S1) and (S2).

Consequently, we have seen that Hume wants to draw a connection between the source of a perception, on the one hand, and its relative degree of force or liveliness, on the other. He wants, in other words, to substantiate the following two equivalences:

> (x) a perception is forceful ↔ it is a sensation, passion, or emotion, and
> (xi) a perception is faint ↔ it is a memory or imagining.

14 It is well-known that Hume was fond of Cicero and likely learned about the Stoics through his writings. The Stoics, moreover, dealt heavily with *phantasia*, which is sometimes translated as "appearances" or "impressions." For discussion, Frede (1983). Moreover, it is perhaps no accident that Hobbes, an empiricist in many ways much like Hume, employed the term "phantasm" to denote sensory perceptions.

15 Contrary to Bennett's claims, however, we do not need veridical perception; Hume can remain agnostic about this. At minimum, Hume is committed to the view that the relevant perception arises via some sensory faculty—the eyes, ears, hands, and so on. In light of this, consider Berkeley's comments at *Principles* 1.1, which are made well within the confines of his idealism and immaterialism.

These two equivalences constitute Hume's initial claims of universal scope. But as witnessed with the general pattern operative throughout *T* 1.1.1 (*SBN* 1–7), Hume is often content to assert what is not strictly or universally true. And as with his discussion of the calm and violent impression of reflection distinction, some of the claims he is willing to assert that are not strictly or universally true come in the form of equivalences. This, indeed, is precisely what is happening when Hume characterizes his impression/idea distinction.

As such, when stating his impression/idea distinction, Hume presents (A1) and (A2) as his definitions by genus and difference and (S1) and (S2) as his definitions by subclass. In short, 'impression' picks out both forceful perceptions *and* sensations, passions, and emotions, whereas 'idea' picks out both weak perceptions *and* memories and imaginings. When these definitions drift apart—as in cases of sleep, disease, madness, or very violent emotions—Hume sometimes uses his terms in one sense rather than the other. Thus

> [...] it sometimes happens, that our impressions [sensations, passions, and emotions] are so faint and low, we cannot distinguish them from our ideas
>
> *T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1

Likewise,

> [...] in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas [memories and imaginings] may approach to our impressions [forceful perceptions].
>
> *T* 1.1.1.1; *SBN* 1

Accordingly, Hume is not committed to an inconsistency. He simply intends to claim that, in some instances, our sensations, passions, and emotions are faint; and that in some instances our memories and imaginings are strong.

5 The Copy Principle

The preceding section indicated how Hume avoids the alleged inconsistency with which we began. It did so by separating feeling from thought, by distinguishing sensations, passions, and emotions on the one hand, from memories and imaginings on the other. But how does Hume distinguish between feeling and thinking? He cannot appeal to force and vivacity as an explanation of the distinction between feeling and thinking, for this would render the equivalences

in (x) and (xi) uninformative. If memories and imaginings are distinguished from sensations, passions, and emotions, because the latter are strong whereas the former are weak, then the equivalences above would be trivial.[16]

Since it is plausible to think that Hume regards such equivalences as informative, the distinction between feeling and thinking must involve something more than a mere difference in vivacity. And, in fact, this is indeed what we find: Hume takes memories and imaginings to be *representations* of past perceptions. He writes, for instance, that when

> I shut my eyes and think of my chamber, the ideas I form are exact representations of the impressions I felt … The one seems to be in a manner the reflection of the other; so that all the perceptions of the mind are double, and appear both as impressions and ideas.
>
> *T* 1.1.1.3; *SBN* 2

And again, when

> […] we reflect on our past sentiments and affections, our thought is a faithful mirror, and copies its objects truly; but the colours which it employs are faint and dull, in comparison of those in which our *original* perceptions were clothed.
>
> *EHU* 2.2; *SBN* 17

Accordingly, Hume takes reflections or thoughts to be *copies of* sensations, passions, and emotions.[17] Sensations, passions, and emotions, on the other hand, do not represent past perceptions, and thus do not constitute reflections or thoughts; on the contrary, they are feelings or "original perceptions" (*EHU* 2.2; *SBN* 17).[18] Hume's feeling/thinking distinction, therefore, lines up with his original/copy distinction. Hence:

16 He can, however, and does, distinguish subclasses *within* thought in terms of force and vivacity (at least in part). For instance, he claims that memories are "somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea", whereas imaginings "entirely lose that vivacity" (*T* 1.1.3.1; *SBN* 9). The role that force and vivacity plays in distinguishing memories from sensations and "perfect ideas" is also, unfortunately, a topic I do not have the space to consider adequately.

17 Hume's views on mental representation have received considerable attention in recent years. See Garrett (2006, 301–319); Landy (2012, 23–54) and Schafer (2015, 978–1005).

18 However, Hume does admit the possibility that sensations represent external objects (*T* 1.2.1.5; *SBN* 28).

> (xii) a perception is a sensation, passion, or emotion ↔ it is an original perception, and
> (xiii) a perception is a memory or an imagining ↔ it is a copied perception.

As further evidence, consider Locke's use of the term 'impression' when discussing his rejection of innate ideas. Locke aims to ground human knowledge "without the help of any innate *impressions*"; that is, without the help of any "*original* notions or principles" (emphasis mine).[19] Likewise, Hume claims that by

> [...] admitting these terms, *impressions* and *ideas*, in the sense above explained, and understanding by *innate*, what is original or copied from no other precedent perception, then may we assert that all our impressions are innate, and our ideas not innate.
>
> *EHU* 2.9, N. 1; *SBN* 21

Hence, Hume seems to identify the class of feelings with the class of original perceptions, and the class of thoughts with the class of copied perceptions. Consequently, taken with (x) and (xi), (xii) and (xiii) entail that:

> (xiv) perception is forceful ↔ it is an original perception, and
> (xv) a perception is faint ↔ it is a copied perception.

It seems, then, that Hume wishes to say that a perception is forceful just in case it is original, and a perception is faint just in case it is a copy.

It should come as no surprise then that one leading interpretation of the impression/idea distinction is in terms of the copy thesis. David Landy, for instance, has argued the terms 'impression' and 'idea' are to be defined as 'original mental entity' and 'copied mental entity', respectively.[20] According to Landy, Hume has us intuitively and "pre-theoretically" separate perceptions into two distinct groups: namely, forceful and faint perceptions, respectively. This, writes Landy, is the sole purpose of Hume's appeal to the phenomenological feature of force and vivacity in marking the distinction between impressions and ideas; it is strictly one of initial categorization. Next, Hume calls the forceful perceptions "impressions" and the faint ones "ideas". Hence, at *T* 1.1.1.7 (*SBN* 4), when Hume presents his copy principle that

19 John Locke, *EHU*, 1.1. Locke frequently employs the term 'impressions' in this way throughout Book One of the *Essay*.

20 Landy (2006, 128).

> [...] *all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent* [...]
>
> *T* 1.1.1.7; *SBN* 4, emphasis in the original

Landy interprets Hume to be empirically substantiating the view that faint perceptions are copies of forceful ones. In light of this initial categorization and naming, Hume discovers an explanation as to why our perceptions can be divided into these two groups, namely, one is a copy of the other. As such, Hume *redefines* 'impression' and 'idea' as 'original mental entity' and 'copied mental entity', respectively. Hence, Landy writes:

> While many readers of Hume take [the copy principle] 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. 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.
>
> LANDY 2006, 124–125

Accordingly, Landy takes the original/copy distinction to be the central feature factoring into the impression/idea distinction. On Landy's interpretation, 'impression' just means 'original mental entity' and 'idea' just means 'copied mental entity', with force and vivacity playing no definitive role. As he puts it,

> [...] 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 impression is drawn using that principle, and not force and vivacity.
>
> LANDY 2006, 120.

An important implication of this view, one which Landy recognizes, is that this renders the copy principle analytic. He regards this as a virtue of the theory, however, because it has seemed to many that Hume appears to wield the copy principle as if it were a principle that is knowable a priori. Of course, Hume seems to provide empirical support for this principle at *T* 1.1.1.8–9 (*SBN* 4–5), but Landy takes this to apply only to the first stage of his proposed account, in which we intuitively separate perceptions into two distinct classes based on

force and vivacity. In the end, however, Landy concedes that the copy principle is analytic.

Given the preceding discussion, then, we can see why Landy would be tempted to render the original/copy distinction the *criterion* for distinguishing impressions from ideas. But this is a mistake. For Hume, 'impression' never *means* 'original mental entity' and 'idea' never *means* 'copied mental entity', no less than 'creature with a heart' *means* 'creature with a kidney'.[21] Contrary to Landy's comments, force and vivacity play a pivotal definitive role in demarcating the impression/idea distinction, the term 'impression' *means* 'forceful perception ' and the term 'idea' *means* 'faint perception'. Now, while Hume supplies intensional definitions in this way, he also generally asserts an extensional equivalence between impressions and feelings, and ideas and thoughts. These, in turn, are extensionally equivalent to original mental entities and copied mental entities. Thus, it makes sense that Landy would find considerable textual evidence that impressions are original perceptions and ideas are copied perceptions. But this is not how Hume *defines* his terms. Moreover, as we have seen, the disagreement is an important one, for our understanding of how Hume uses his terms has a bearing on our interpretation of the copy principle. So understood, when Hume expresses his copy thesis at *T* 1.1.1.7 (*SBN* 4), claiming as he does that "*all our simple ideas ... are deriv'd from simple impressions*" (emphasis in the original), he intends that all our simple *faint perceptions* are derived from our simple *forceful perceptions*. This renders the copy principle an empirical generalization, as opposed to analytic, as Landy supposes.[22]

This suggests something very interesting is occurring at *T* 1.1.1.1 (*SBN* 1) and *EHU* 2.1–3 (*SBN* 17–18). As we have seen, at *T* 1.1.1.1 (SBN 1), for instance, in exceptionless cases Hume defines 'impressions' as those perceptions "which enter with most force and violence" (intensional definition) and as "sensations, passions and emotions" (extensional definition). Likewise, he defines 'ideas' as those perceptions which are the "faint" (intensional definition) "images of [impressions] in thinking and reasoning" (extensional definition). Thus, in the very first paragraph of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, Hume is already presupposing an extensional equivalence between each type of definition. But Hume's defense of the copy thesis—which helps to ground these equivalences—does not come until *T* 1.1.1.8–9 (*SBN* 4–5) and *EHU* 2.6–7 (*SBN* 19–20), both of which occur *after* he has presented the impression/idea distinction and presupposed the relevant equivalences.

21 To use Quine's (1980) famous example.

22 See Flew (1969) for an example of those who view the principle as *a priori* and necessary. See Garrett (2002) for an expression of those who regard it as an empirical generalization.

This suggests that some kind of *holism* or *coherence* account may be operative in Hume's approach. Indeed, as Bennett at one-point remarks about *T* 1.1.1.1 (*SBN* 1), "too many things happen at once".[23] As we have seen already, at *T* 1.1.1.1 (*SBN* 1), Hume intends to provide two kinds of definitions—an intensional and an extensional definition—although such equivalences need to be demonstrated. And since he has decided to open Book 1 of the *Treatise* with that distinction, he presupposes that which he can only substantiate later, and indeed which he does attempt to substantiate at *T* 1.1.1.8–9 (*SBN* 4–5) and *EHU* 2.6–7 (*SBN* 19–20). Furthermore, Hume recognizes that such equivalences hold only generally—indeed, he notes the exceptions already at T 1.1.1.1 (*SBN* 1) and *EHU* 2.1 (*SBN* 17), when he mentions sleep, disease, madness, and very violent emotions—and thus the equivalences will require continual justification to ensure that there are no devastating exceptions. It is for this reason Hume writes that a "*full* examination of this question is the subject of the present treatise" (*T* 1.1.1.7; *SBN* 4).

6 Conclusion

Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas has caused considerable controversy. Given the textual evidence, there is a presumption favoring the force and vivacity interpretation, but the textual evidence also seems to burden Hume with a blatant inconsistency. In this paper, I have shown that Hume sometimes includes two kinds of definitions: *definitions by genus and difference* and *definitions by subclass*. I have argued that force and vivacity are central to his genus/difference definition, and that feeling and thinking are central to his definition by subclass. Hume wishes to claim that, while these are not strictly or universally equivalent, they are equivalent enough. This provides the resources to show how Hume escapes any purported inconsistency in his claims.

Such considerations, however, have also shown how Hume's philosophical project is more complicated and nuanced than one might have initially thought. Hume's procedure at *T* 1.1.1.1 and *EHU* 2.1–3, in which he embarks upon his philosophical project, appears to be more holistic than Hume initially puts on. These are considerations that warrant further analysis and treatment, as well as the implications such considerations have for our understanding of Hume's pivotal copy principle. In any case, we can rest assured that Hume does not open his monumental *Treatise* with a blatant inconsistency.

23 Bennett (2001, 203).

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