

Hume on the Imagination

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1 Introduction

This chapter overviews Hume’s thoughts on the nature and the role of imagining and how the two are linked to the relevant contemporary discussions, with an almost exclusive focus on the first book of the *Treatise of Human Nature*.¹

Over the course of this text, Hume draws and discusses three important distinctions among our conscious mental episodes (or what he calls “perceptions”).² First, he divides them into “impressions” and “ideas” – or, as he also says, into “feelings” and “thoughts” (1.1.1). The former comprise “sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul” (1.1.1.1) – that is, perceptual experiences, bodily sensations, and basic feelings of desire and emotion. By contrast, the latter include “the faint images of [impressions] in thinking and reasoning” (ibid.) – such as memories, occurrent beliefs and, indeed, imaginings.

Hume then distinguishes two types of ideas, namely “ideas of the memory” and “ideas of the imagination” (1.1.3 and 1.3.5). Finally, the ideas of the imagination are again separated into “ideas of the judgement” (or “beliefs” or “opinions”) and “ideas of the fancy” (or “mere fictions”; 1.3.7ff. and the Appendix). Ideas of the fancy comprise what we call today instances or episodes of imagining – such as visualising or auditorily imagining something, imagining or supposing that something is the case, or imagining feeling or doing something. By contrast, ideas of the judgement include occurrent beliefs and judgemental thoughts, while ideas of the memory are identical with episodes of remembering or recalling. All of these ideas are contrasted by Hume with perceptual experiences and

other types of impressions.

From the point of view of philosophy of imagination, all three of Hume's distinctions are of particular significance. The difference between impressions and ideas is central to the issue of how to tell apart sensory forms of the imagination (e.g. visualising) from their perceptual counterparts (e.g. seeing) [Nanay, *Imagination and Perception*]. The contrast between memory and imagination as distinct sources of ideas is relevant for the differentiation of episodic memory from imaginative experience [Debus, *Imagination and Memory*]. And the distinction between occurrent beliefs and mere fictions is Hume's attempt at distinguishing what we would nowadays treat as distinct types of thought or propositional attitude [Sinhababu, *Imagination and Belief*].

I shall discuss each distinction in turn (§§ 2-3). In addition, I consider Hume's views on the imagination as a faculty aimed at the production of ideas (§ 3), as well as on the role that imagining plays in the wider context of our mental lives, notably in the acquisition of modal knowledge and in the comprehension of stories and opinions that we take to be false or fictional (§ 4). I close with some remarks about why Hume's views on the imagination are still important from a contemporary perspective (§ 5).

2 Seeing, Visualising, and the Copy Principle

Hume's contribution to the debate about the nature of visualising and other forms of sensory imagining and their distinction from the corresponding perceptual experiences is encapsulated in his conception of the relationship between impressions and ideas. When describing this relationship, Hume follows his empiricist predecessors Locke (1690/2008) and Berkeley (1710/2009) in claiming that all knowledge or belief has to start with perception. In particular, the concepts involved in our thoughts cannot be innate, but have to be acquired empirically. We cannot recall, imagine or think about something blue (or salty, musky, etc.) unless we have experienced something blue (or salty, musky, etc.).

This empiricist doctrine is embodied in Hume's famous "Copy Principle", according to which "*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*" (1.1.1.7). The two types of mental episode are therefore distinguished by Hume in terms of their origin: while

simple ideas are “nothing but copies and representations” of simple impressions (1.1.7.5), simple impressions are not copies of any preceding perceptions (Hume 1748/2007: § II.17; Cohon and Owen 1997: § 2; Landy 2006: 124f.). The restriction of the Copy Principle to *simple* ideas and impressions is meant to take into account that we can recall, imagine or think about more complex things like a blue circle even if we have never seen one. All that is required is that we have seen a blue object, as well as a (possibly different) round object.

Hume highlights several aspects of the copying relation. First, it is a relation of asymmetric dependence: every simple idea depends, in one way or another, on the simple impression that it is a copy of. Second, the relation of copying is also a relation of correspondence: “all simple ideas and impressions resemble each other” (1.1.1.6). More specifically, they resemble each other in what they make us aware of. If a simple impression makes us aware of something round, then its copy, in the shape of some simple idea, also makes us aware of something round. Third, these two aspects of the copying relation are closely related. For simple ideas depend on simple impressions in such a way that the two end up resembling each other. Fourth, the kind of dependence in question is causal: “our impressions are the causes of our ideas” (1.1.1.8). This means that every simple idea has to be causally preceded by a corresponding simple impression – which is why we cannot have an idea of something round, say, without the prior existence of an impression of something round.

These four aspects of the copying relation may be summarised by the slogan that copies are causal reproductions. That is, simple ideas are derived from simple impressions in roughly the same way in which photocopies are derived from the original sheets of paper. In both cases, the copies causally depend on the originals and, as result, also resemble them in relevant aspects (*ibid.*: 125ff.). Now, understanding simple ideas as causal reproductions of simple impressions has two important consequences, both of which apply to impressions and ideas independently of whether they are simple or complex.

The first is that, because impressions make us exclusively aware of concrete objects and their features, ideas do so, too (1.1.7; Laurence and Margolis 2012: § 2). This means that, whenever we are recalling, imagining or thinking about a triangle, we always have an individual and relatively specific triangle in mind (e.g. an equilateral one of a certain

size, etc.). So there are no genuinely general or abstract ideas: we cannot think about triangles or triangularity in abstraction from particular instances. Our ideas of triangles always make us aware of individual triangles with determinate angles, sides, and so on. One way of understanding this conclusion – though not necessarily the only one – is that not only experience, but also thought is always imagistic in nature (Prinz 2002: ch. 5; Martin 2006: 76).

The second, and related, consequence is that impressions and ideas “differ only in degree, not in nature” (1.1.1.5). That only ideas, but not impressions are copies does not constitute a difference in nature because causal origin is not an essential feature of mental episodes. Similarly, as we have just seen, the two types of mental episode are not distinguished by what they make us aware of. Nor do they differ in how they make us aware of things. Hume is a relationalist and indirect realist about impressions, meaning that he takes them to acquaint us with internal, mind-dependent objects (1.2.6; 1.4.2;) or “images” (Hume 1748/2007: § XII.1). And the same has to be true of ideas, given that they are nothing but causal reproductions of impressions. In particular, Hume does not share our contemporary conception of thoughts as non-relational (or intentional) representations.

Hume describes the quantitative difference between impressions and ideas as a difference “only in their strength and vivacity” (1.1.7.5). He does not characterise this difference in much more detail, though, noting that “[i]t will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction” since “[e]very one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking” (1.1.1.1). But this and other passages make clear that Hume takes the difference to be open to introspection.³ Moreover, the introspectible and quantitative character of the difference really only leaves two options (Govier 1972: 48; Martin 2001: 270).⁴

On the one hand, impressions may differ from ideas in being more detailed or more determinate in their presentation of their concrete objects. For instance, there is some plausibility to the claim that, when we are seeing something, we are aware of a larger or more continuous range of properties, more precise lengths or sizes, or finer distinctions among hues, than when we are visually recalling or visualising something.

On the other hand, impressions may differ from ideas in the intensity or specificity of their qualitative (and possibly non-presentational) aspects. It seems reasonable to assume

that actual feelings may be stronger and more determinate than recalled or imagined ones; or that visually recalled or visualised colours lack the “brightness” of seen ones (1.3.7.5).

Moreover, both differences in degree can be explained by reference to the notion of causal reproduction. Just as photocopying leads to a loss of clarity and saturation of the ink marks on the paper, recalling, imagining or thinking about something previously seen leads to a loss of detail and determinacy in awareness.

However, Hume acknowledges that this impact of the copying relation on vivacity does not prevent impressions from being very faint, and ideas from being very lively, with the consequence that we cannot always correctly identify them as what they are (1.1.1.1). As a result, there is not always a recognisable threshold of vivacity which strictly separates impressions from ideas (Landy 2006: 121). Indeed, even though it is unclear whether Hume would go that far, it seems plausible to assume that there can be certain ideas (e.g. very vivid memories, or a very detailed visualisations) that are more lively than certain impressions (e.g. visual perceptions during the night, or in foggy weather; Allison 2008: 16f. Budd 1991: 104). Perhaps all that can be argued is that a given idea can never be more vivid than the particular impression that it is a copy of. Correspondingly, although photocopying may be unable to improve the print quality of the text on the original sheet, say, it is surely possible that some original documents are almost unreadable because of smear and indistinct characters, while some photocopies show very clear and sharp print.

As a consequence, the recognisable difference in vivacity between impressions and ideas is merely typical, meaning that it obtains often, but not all the time. That a mental episode is very lively is thus not always an indication that the episode is an impression rather than an idea. Given that, for Hume, there are no other features that might reveal to us in introspection which causal origin mental episodes possess, we cannot always introspectively tell whether a given episode is an impression or an idea (Garrett 2008: 42f.).

Hume’s resulting empiricist theory of the conscious mind faces several well-known objections, two of which I will mention here. The first is the famous example of the missing shade of blue, which Hume acknowledged himself as a counterexample to his Copy Principle (1.1.1.10). His claim is that it is possible for us to visualise a particular shade of blue without ever having seen it, just on the basis of seeing an arrangement of all other shades of blue, especially those that are very close in hue to the missing shade. But if

Hume is right about this possibility (and it seems difficult to deny this), we have a simple idea that is not preceded by a corresponding simple impression. Hume's own assessment of the significance of this counterexample to the Copy Principle is that "the instance is so particular and singular, that it is scarce worth our observing, and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim" (1.1.1.10).

However, it is doubtful that Hume can really be so nonchalant about the case (Stroud 1999: 34; Broadie 2009: 155). First of all, there are probably many more examples like this (e.g. concerning sounds, smells, tastes, etc.; *ibid.*: 154; Garrett 1997: 50). But the main problem is that, if the Copy Principle is indeed just a "general maxim", "empirical rule" or "empirical generalization" (Morris and Brown 2013: § 5; Garrett 1997: 50) that allows for exceptions or "near misses" (*ibid.*: 52; Garrett 2008: 51), the distinction between impressions and ideas collapses. For instance, we may visualise the missing shade in a very vivid manner. In this case, our imaginative experience may be as lively as the experience of someone who sees the same shade of blue. Moreover, both experiences are originals, rather than copies. Hence, it remains unclear how Hume could still distinguish our idea from the other person's impression, given that they differ neither in their vivacity, nor in their causal origin.

In line with his basic empiricist assumption, Hume might insist that it is still true that ideas, but not impressions, causally derive from impressions. For we arguably form our idea of the missing shade on the basis of our impressions of the other shades of blue, notably those that are very close in hue to the missing shade (Russow 1980: 344; Garrett 1997: 50ff. Garrett 2008: 51; Morris and Brown 2013: § 5). But since this is not an instance of causal reproduction, Hume would be forced to substantially revise his original account of simple ideas (Stroud 1999: 34). More specifically, he would have to replace his Copy Principle with a more general characterisation of simple ideas as causally dependent on simple impressions, which captures both causal reproduction and the kind of causation involved in the example of the missing shade of blue.

Alternatively, Hume might maintain that our idea of the missing shade differs from a comparable impression in not inclining us (so strongly) to form the belief that there is something with the shade of blue in question in front of us. This would require the assumption that being inclined to believe comes in degrees and is also part of vivacity or strength

(Everson 1988; see also § 3 below). For, otherwise, Hume would have to give up one of his central claims, namely that impressions and ideas differ merely quantitatively. But, now, the problem would be to rule out that ideas – like ours in the example of the missing shade of blue – could sometimes be as much belief-inducing as typical impressions, despite being possibly equally forceful and vivid in all other respects.

The second major objection to Hume’s treatment of the distinction between impressions and ideas – and, hence, between seeing and visualising – is simply that there are many good reasons to conclude that the two types of mental episode differ qualitatively in their nature. In other words, we have good reason to believe that visualising is not just a weak or faint form of seeing.

The first thing to note is that visualising lacks the immediacy of seeing (Hopkins 1998: ch. 7; Martin 2002). This is a phenomenological point about how objects are visually presented. When we see an object, it seems to us to be directly before us, as part of our actual environment. But the same is not true of visualising. If you sit in your living room, close your eyes and simply visualise a car, you do not visualise it as being in your actual surroundings (e.g. next to the sofa). Taken by themselves, episodes of visualising are neutral about which objects are located where in our actual environment, while episodes of seeing are not (ibid.; Dorsch 2010). But this phenomenological difference – which Malebranche (1674/1997: 79 and 87f.), Husserl (1901/1970: A 413), Sartre (1940/2004: 12f.) and others have tried to capture by saying that objects seen appear to be “present”, while objects visualised seem to be “absent” – is one of kind, not of degree.

Another important qualitative difference between the two kinds of episode concerns their functional and rational role. Seeing something has an impact on belief and action that visualising does not have. For example, if we see a glass of water before us on the table and are unaware of any defeaters, we are normally inclined and entitled to believe that there is a glass of water before us, and to try to grab it if this would further our ends (e.g. if we are thirsty). But if we are merely visualising a glass of water while looking at the table, we are usually neither moved, nor justified to believe in the presence of the glass, or to try to seize it. Again, the difference at issue is not a quantitative one.

Finally, seeing and visualising differ in how they relate to voluntary agency (Dorsch 2012: chs. 13f.). Although seeing may involve, or be intimately connected to, deliberate

action concerning aspects like the focus and duration of attention, or the direction of gaze (O'Shaughnessy 2003: part II; Crowther 2010), it is never up to us which objects we end up seeing, and how we end up seeing them as being, once we have decided to look with open eyes in a certain direction. For instance, if there is a red apple before me, I cannot decide to see a green pear in its stead. Visualising, on the other hand, involves at least the general possibility to exert this kind of control. Although we may sometimes fail to produce or banish a certain image, we typically are able to visualise a green pear, say, if we want to. But, anew, whether something is open to voluntary influence is not a matter of degree.

Because of objections like these, it is probably better to reject Hume's account of ideas. The question is only how much of it we should give up. As some Neo-Humean views illustrate, it is possible to largely hold on to the Copy Principle, and to modify only one of the four aspects of Hume's original conception of copies. More specifically, the suggestion is to continue to understand ideas as resembling impressions because of their asymmetric dependence on the latter, but to deny that the dependence in question is causal. Rather, the constitutive relation between the two types of episode should be taken to be representational: ideas are inherently representations of impressions, in roughly the same sense in which paintings are inherently representations of what they depict (Munoz-Dardé 2002: 2; see Cohon and Owen 1997: § 2 and Garrett 2006 for different interpretations of the "representationality" of ideas).

Copies that are inherently representational differ from causal reproductions in that they do not require the existence of what is copied. One can paint a man without painting any particular man that existed prior to or during the act of painting. Good examples are Dutch genre images from the 17th century, which depict only certain types of people (e.g. the drunkard or the love interest). Instead, paintings depend on what they depict in a different sense: they are partly constituted and individuated by what they represent. No representation could exist without something being represented. And a representation would cease to be the same if what it represents were to change. It is in this sense that Neo-Humeans assume imaginative experiences to be non-relational representations or "imaginings" of perceptual experiences, as captured by the so-called *Dependency Thesis* that "to imagine sensorily a φ is to imagine experiencing a φ " (Martin 2002: 404; see also

Peacocke 1985 and O’Shaughnessy 2003: ch. 12).

If we understand ideas as copies in the sense of representations, both objections against the Copy Principle lose their force. The missing shade of blue is not a counterexample anymore because imagining seeing something with a particular hue does not presuppose having seen that hue before – just as we can depict a man with a certain appearance without ever having seen someone who looked like the depicted.

In addition, the difference between impressions and ideas turns out to be qualitative. If impressions are assumed to relationally *acquaint* us with objects (whether internal or external), impressions and ideas differ in kind because the latter are taken to be non-relational representations (Dauer 1999: 85f.). If, on the other hand, impressions are conceived of as inherently *representing* their objects, the two kinds of mental episode differ qualitatively because they represent different entities (i.e. mental episodes vs. their objects). It is thus possible to account for the various differences in kind between seeing and visualising. Notably, the latter’s lack of immediacy may be due to the fact that what we directly imagine is just a perceptual experience of an object, and not the object itself (Dorsch 2010).

Of course, the endorsement of something like the Dependency Thesis is not without its own problems – not the least with respect to whether it can be extended to more thought-like ideas, such as judgements (Dorsch 2012: ch. 9). But, at least, it offers a way of holding on to empiricism and the Copy Principle in the face of some of the main objections to Hume’s original account of ideas.

3 Recalling, Believing, and Imagining

Hume’s distinction between perceptions and imaginative episodes in terms of impressions and ideas does not yet tell us anything about the latter’s difference from other non-perceptual experiences or thoughts, notably episodic memories and occurrent beliefs. Hume addresses this further issue by contrasting the three types of idea already mentioned: (i) ideas of the memory; (ii) ideas of the judgement; and (iii) ideas of the fancy (Garrett 2008: 45). That impressions and ideas vary merely in degree has the consequence that the same also holds for the three types of idea. For, if there were differences in kind among them, not all of them could be of the same kind as impressions. Hence, there can only be

quantitative, but no qualitative variances in nature between ideas – which explains why Hume usually maintains that the three types of idea differ just in their “force” or “vivacity” (1.3.5.3; 1.3.7.7; 1.3.8.15f.; Cottrell 2015: § 2).

This raises, again, the question of what it means for certain mental episodes to be stronger or more lively than others. Since Hume conceives of all ideas as perception-like presentations of objects, the two options for differences in vivacity mentioned earlier still apply. Accordingly, ideas may differ from each other in the intensity and determinacy of their qualitative aspects, or in the number, continuity and specificity of the objects and properties that they make us aware of.

However, Hume is not completely happy with this description of the difference in degree between ideas (1.3.7.7; 1.3.8.15f.). He writes that “there are other differences among ideas, which cannot be properly be comprehended under these terms” and suggests that speaking of a difference in “feeling [...] shou’d have been nearer the truth” (Appendix, 22). In accordance with this thought, Hume identifies the vivacity of ideas (and, incidentally, also of impressions) with the feeling of “assent”, which “alone distinguishes [memory and the senses] from the imagination” (1.3.6.7), and also “the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination” (1.3.7.7).

We can identify at least five different features of assent, as conceived of by Hume as central to vivacity. First, it is an aspect of mental episodes which is accessible to introspection (i.e. “felt by the mind”; 1.3.7.7). Second, it pertains both to impressions and to certain ideas, namely memories and occurrent beliefs (ibid.; 1.3.6.7). Third, it has an impact on the causal or functional role of the episodes concerned (1.3.7.7 and 1.3.10.3; Govier 1972: 47; Everson 1988). In particular, it increases their influence on our agency, on our emotions and on our imagination-based formation of beliefs. When we see, remember or believe that someone is in danger, we have a much stronger tendency to help him, to fear for him or to reason to the belief that he might really die, than when we merely imagine that he is in danger. In this way, Hume can explain, for instance, why we do not respond in the same ways to real-life cases and to fictional stories (Walton 1990). Fourth, the feeling of assent renders the episodes concerned more persistent (i.e. “infixes them in the mind”; 1.3.7.7), possibly in the form of dispositional mental states (Govier 1972: 48; Loeb 2002: III.2; Marušić 2010). We are more inclined to acquire dispositional beliefs on

the basis of perceptions, memories and judgements than on the basis of mere imaginings. Fifth, assent – like any other feeling – comes in degrees. In other words, for Hume, having an impact on other mental phenomena is not an all-or-nothing issue. What he seems to have in mind when talking about the feeling of assent thus comes close to what we would call the subjective confidence or degree of belief pertaining to our judgemental thoughts (Govier 1972: 52; Loeb 2002: IV).

The resulting difference is again, however, at best a typical difference, given that ideas of the fancy can be very lively and have a strong impact on belief and agency, while ideas of the memory or the judgement may be very weak and without much influence on other mental phenomena (1.3.5.6). As in the case of the contrast between impressions and ideas, this means that we cannot always tell by introspection whether a given idea is a recollection, an occurrent belief or an episode of imagining (1.3.5.3ff.; Traiger 2008: 64; 66f.).

Moreover, any differentiation of these three types of idea has to make reference to their distinct and non-essential origins, namely to the different ways in which they are produced by the mind. As their name suggests, ideas of the memory originate in the faculty of memory. The other two types of idea are, for Hume, the product of the imagination (ibid.: 60). Even beliefs formed on the basis of reasoning are said to be outputs of the imagination, in stark opposition to the more traditional view that beliefs are the product of reason.

But Hume is not always consistent in his terminology, as he himself acknowledges in a footnote added after the first publication of the *Treatise* (1.3.9.19; Furlong 1961: 65; Winkler 1999; Wright 2013). When he speaks of “the imagination”, what he usually has in mind is the “faculty, by which we form our fainter ideas” (1.3.9.19, n. 22). This faculty is responsible for the production of all ideas, except the more vivid ideas of the memory. Hume’s notion of the imagination is thus – like Kant (1781/1999)’s – wider than our contemporary one in encompassing not only imagining, but also thinking and occurrently believing. However, sometimes, Hume also uses the term “imagination” in a narrower sense that does not refer to the faculty of the imagination as a whole, but only to those of its exercises that occur outside of reasoning-based belief formation (1.3.9.19, n. 22; Cottrell 2015: § 2). The narrower notion thus concerns solely what Hume on occasion

calls “mere fictions” or “ideas of the fancy” (1.3.13.9) and comes close to what we today would take to be imagining proper. The subsequent discussion focuses on Hume’s primary, wider notion of the imagination, according to which it is the faculty of producing non-mnemonic ideas.

Both memory and imagination operate with simple ideas that are copied from simple impressions. But they differ, according to Hume, in that “the imagination is not restrain’d to the same order and form with the original impressions; while the memory is in a manner ty’d down in that respect, without any power of variation” (1.1.3.2). In other words, what matters for the difference is whether the relations between the simple ideas concerned are causally determined by, and thus mirror, the relations between the relevant simple impressions. For example, after having seen first a green caterpillar and then later the yellow butterfly that it turned into, we count as recalling these two stages of the animal’s transformation only if two things are preserved: the temporal order of the two stages that we saw, and the combination of impressions at each of the stages. If one of our complex ideas presents the butterfly as green (different form), or as being the first stage in the animal’s life (different order), it is not an idea of the memory, but one of the imagination (1.1.3.3; Traiger 2008: 62f.).

However, we cannot come to know introspectively whether the order and form of the simple ideas indeed correspond to, and are causally determined by, the order and form of previous simple impressions. For this would require that we could compare the two – which we cannot do anymore, given that the impressions concerned have already ceased to exist. And, of course, trying to recall these impressions would not help, since what is at issue is precisely how to determine when a given idea is a recollection, and not an imagining, of a previous impression (1.3.5.3). So, our best hope to distinguish the two types of idea in introspection is to focus on their degree of vivacity – which, as already mentioned, does not always help us to successfully tell them apart.

Turning our attention to ideas of the imagination, two questions are particularly pressing. First, why does Hume think that one and the same faculty is responsible for both judging and imagining? And, second, how do, for him, the two types of idea still differ in origin?

With respect to the first question, the orthodox view – not only among traditional

rationalists like Descartes (1637/1641/1980) or Kant (1781/1999), but also among contemporary philosophers with strong empiricist tendencies (Williams 1980; Railton 2003; Dretske 1988; Owens 2000) – is that the faculty producing judgements or beliefs is reason, and not imagination. The underlying thought is that beliefs are in need of justification, and that we can ensure that our beliefs are justified only if we form them in response to reasons. But Hume spends much time arguing that we are unable to justify our (contingent and empirical) beliefs in this way, neither on the basis of perception (1.4.2), nor on that of inductive reasoning (1.3.6). In other words, he is skeptical about the role of reason in our mental life and does not think that we acquire our beliefs (or other attitudes: 2.3.3) in response to reasons (see Garrett 1997, Millican 1998, Owen 1999, Allison 2008, Cottrell 2015: § 7 and Schmitt 2014: Division IV for further debate).

Instead, we are said to form them due to habit, in the shape of causal mechanisms of association that determine our imagination: “[w]hen the mind, therefore, passes from the idea or impression of one object to the idea or belief of another, it is not determin’d by reason, but by certain principles, which associate together the ideas of these objects, and unite them in the imagination” (1.3.6.12). For example, if it happens that, whenever a subject has an impression of smoke, she also has an impression of fire, her mind will come to associate smoke with fire. As a result, she will be prompted to judge that there is a fire if she sees some smoke, and to judge that smoke always comes with fire if she reflects on the nature of smoke. Furthermore, this associative link will be weakened or undermined, once she encounters smoke that derives from a different source than fire (e.g. from a chemical reaction). By contrast, when the person imagines smoke, she is free to imagine it to be due to, or connected with, anything that she wants (1.1.3.4). So, while both ideas of the judgement and ideas of the fancy are produced by the associative imagination, their origins differ because there are very distinct constraints on their production in play (Cottrell 2015: §§ 2f.). Hume’s response to the first question thus also provides his answer to the second.

It remains unclear, however, why we should follow Hume in assuming that episodes of believing and episodes of imagining are the result of one and the same faculty. The only feature that the two types of episode share is that they combine ideas without recreating the form and order of the relevant impressions. But, otherwise, reasoning and fancy do

not have much in common. Indeed, they differ, for instance, in whether they allow for the voluntary determination of what we end up experiencing or thinking – that is, in whether we can make use of the “liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas” (1.1.3.4). While we enjoy at least some control over what we are imagining, it is not up to us which proposition we end up endorsing in judgement or belief (Williams 1973; OwensReason). Indeed, since episodic memories share this aspect of involuntariness with occurrent beliefs (i.e. we also cannot influence how we remember things as being), it is not easy to understand why these two types of episode should pertain to different faculties, but not involuntary beliefs and voluntary imaginings. After all, reasoning seems to be much closer to memory than to voluntary imagination in how it brings about, and determines the content of, mental episodes (Dorsch 2009).

In any case, the differences in origin between ideas of the memory, ideas of the judgement and ideas of the fancy promises to explain why the first two generally involve a stronger feeling of assent than the last ones. As said earlier, ideas receive their vivacity from the – normally stronger – vivacity of the impressions that they are copies of. And the same should apply to assent, given that Hume identifies it with (part of) vivacity. However, since all ideas are copied from impressions, the copying relation alone is unable to account for every difference in assent among the various types of idea. Not surprisingly, Hume stresses that it also matters how the ideas are combined with each other, or with impressions (e.g. when we judge that some seen smoke is due to an unseen fire).

According to him, the two ways of preventing a partial or even complete loss of the original strength of assent are recollection and association (1.3.8f.). In both cases, the ideas in question are said to acquire a high degree of assent not merely because they are copies of vivid impressions (for this is true of all ideas), but primarily because they preserve some of the relations between those impressions. Either the ideas repeat the connections between several particular impressions – for instance, when we remember that a certain instance of smoke was related to a certain instance of fire. Or the ideas reflect the constant conjunction of two types of impression individuated by what they make us aware of – which happens, say, when we come to judge that smoke is caused by fire, or when seeing smoke prompts us to think of fire as its cause, because each time, that we perceive smoke, we also perceive fire. By contrast, the combination of the idea of wings and the idea of

a horse, say, is not backed up by experience in the same way, which is why imagining a winged horse lacks the vivacity characteristic of memory and belief.

One immediate problem with this picture of ideas is that it does not easily apply to simple ideas. While Hume does not really address this issue, he is very clear about the fact that simple ideas can involve assent or vivacity to different degrees – for instance, when he writes that “belief is somewhat more than a simple idea”, and that “[t]he effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions [...] in force and vivacity” (1.3.7.6; 1.3.10.3). This raises the question of why some simple ideas are livelier than others, and whether these lively simple ideas are ideas of the memory, of the judgement, or of a third, yet unnamed type.⁵ The two criteria just discussed cannot provide us with an answer because both concern exclusively ways in which ideas might be combined with other ideas (or impressions), which is not what happens during the production of a simple idea.

The other main difficulty for Hume’s account of ideas is, again, that it fails to capture important qualitative differences among recollections, occurrent beliefs and imaginings. To start with, there are good reasons to assume that the contents of thought differ in kind from the contents of experience. For example, thought contents are subject to propositional logic, but sensory contents are not (Crane 2009). If we are able to think that p or that q , then we are also able to think their negation, conjunction, disjunction, implication, and so on. But we cannot see the negation of a green tree (which is not the same as not seeing a green tree, or as seeing a red tree). Nor does seeing a green tree in front a blue sky amount to having an experience with a content that consists in the logical conjunction of two other sensory contents.⁶

The same is true of qualitative differences in functional and rational role, which, at least in the case of thoughts, are often described in terms of differences in attitude towards the content concerned. While visualising or imagining the Earth as being flat normally neither inclines, nor entitles us to come to believe that this is the case and act accordingly, recalling or judging the flatness of the Earth does (e.g. it will influence how we navigate our ships). Furthermore, in contrast to imagining, we have, as already mentioned, no voluntary control over our occurrent memories and beliefs. We cannot deliberately decide to recall or judge that an apple, that we saw to be red in the past, is green, or a pear.

In order to handle these objections, while staying as close to Hume's initial account of ideas as possible, two adjustments should probably be made. First, the difference in kind between sensory and thought contents should be acknowledged. This might actually require giving up the Copy Principle for thoughts and limiting it to imaginative and mnemonic experiences, both of which differ from perceptual ones in their lack of sensory immediacy (Martin 2001). Second, assent should not be understood as a feeling, but rather as an aspect of functional or rational role (Loeb 2002). This move preserves Hume's observation that there are some respects in which occurrent beliefs are closer to perceptual and mnemonic experiences than to imaginative experiences or thoughts, namely concerning their links to belief and agency. Moreover, both modifications should be compatible with Hume's broadly naturalistic and empiricist outlook on mind and world.

4 Modal Knowledge and Imaginative Resistance

Having gained some clarity about Hume's conception of imaginative episodes, let us now turn to the issue of which role Hume supposes the imagination to play in our mental life. We already noted that he takes this faculty to be responsible for the production of both occurrent beliefs and episodes of imagining. But, according to Hume, the imagination also has a particular epistemic function. More specifically, imagining may help us to discover modal truths. Hume's first claim is that conceivability implies metaphysical possibility (i.e. possibility of existence): "[w]e can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist" (1.2.2.8). He also endorses the second claim that inconceivability – at least if due to contradiction (Garrett 2008: 54) – implies metaphysical impossibility: "[w]e can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible" (1.2.2.8). Given these two claims, we can come to know whether something is possible by reflecting on whether it is conceivable.

It is clear from Hume's remarks on the issue that he identifies conceivability with imaginability (1.2.2.8; Lightner 1997: 115; Cottrell 2015: § 6). Accordingly, what is, for him, indicative of whether something could exist is primarily whether we can have an idea of it (or, of course, an impression, given that we can form an idea of whatever is presented to us by an impression). Furthermore, because of his endorsement of empiricism,

Hume takes conception always to be specific and imagistic (see § 2) – in sharp contrast to Descartes (1637/1641/1980) who assumes that modal knowledge is instead grounded in abstract, intellectual understanding (Gendler and Hawthorne 2006; Cottrell 2015: § 6).

Hume's conclusion that the imagination provides us with access to modal truths is jointly motivated by three central elements of his theory of the mind: (i) his empiricist doctrine that all concepts are ultimately derived from perception; (ii) his relationalism about perception; and (iii) his indirect realism about perception (see § 2 above). Since all simple ideas are copies of simple impressions, and since ideas can be combined only in exactly the same ways as impressions because both types of episode involve the same kind of awareness of concrete objects and their features, it follows that, for each possible idea, there is a corresponding possible impression. In short, if something is conceivable, then it is also perceivable. That we can think of a golden mountain or a winged horse, say, indicates that we could also see one (if one were to exist). Similarly, that we cannot perceive a round square (because there could not exist any) means that we cannot conceive of one, either.

Now, for Hume, perception is genuinely relational: whenever we have a perceptual experience, there really exists a concrete object that we are thereby acquainted with. But if the perception of an object implies its actual existence, then perceivability implies possible existence. Taken together, empiricism and relationalism entail Hume's first claim that conceivability entails possibility. Of course, these considerations show that perception, too, is a guide to possibility. But imagination has the advantage that it is not constrained by how the actual world is like and, hence, allows for the freedom necessary to explore the full range of unrealised possibilities.

The modal truths in question concern the objects of perceptual experience. According to Hume's indirect realism, these objects are identical with internal (i.e. experience-dependent) objects, rather than with external (i.e. experience-independent) ones (Hume 1748/2007: XII.9). Moreover, he is – contrary to Locke (1690/2008) – skeptical about there being any (knowable) resemblances between the two kinds of object and, hence, any justified inference from features of internal objects to features of external objects (1.4.2; Hume 1748/2007: XII.11f. Strawson 1989: 45, n. 19). As a result, the imagination does not provide us with access to modal truths about external reality. At best, it may serve as

the origin of an unjustified projection of modal truths about internal objects onto external ones – which is why Hume is standardly classified as an anti- or quasi-realist about modality (Kail 2003; Coventry 2006). In addition, since internal objects are dependent on the respective mental episodes, modal truths about the first (e.g. that a red circle is possible) are inseparable from corresponding modal truths about the second (e.g. that an experience or a thought of a red circle is possible). So, in learning something about experience-dependent objects, we simultaneously learn something about experience and thought.

Empiricists who reject Hume's assumption that we perceive internal objects may still hold on to the idea that conceivability gives us access to modal truths about external reality. But dropping indirect realism deprives their account of an important resource needed to establish Hume's second claim that inconceivability implies impossibility. External objects can exist not only without being perceived, but also without being perceivable. Hence, that something is unperceivable – and thus also inconceivable due to the Copy Principle – does not mean that it is impossible. By contrast, internal objects cannot exist without being perceived. Their unperceivability therefore implies their impossibility. So, Hume can validate his second claim about the imagination's epistemological role only because he endorses indirect realism, in addition to empiricism and relationalism.

Hume's take on modal epistemology may be attacked in various ways. In addition to rejecting one of the three elements of his theory of mind just highlighted, it is possible to object that Hume can at best establish his first claim, that imaginability is a guide to possibility. What he maintains is that, in order to determine whether something is possible, we have to determine whether it is conceivable. And we discover whether something is conceivable by actually trying to conceive of it and introspectively noting whether we are successful in this attempt. We normally have no difficulties noticing in introspection whether we are imagining something and, if yes, what it is. But, in situations where we fail to imagine something, introspection may tell us only that this is *actually* the case, and not that we could not *possibly* imagine it. In addition, noting our inability to imagine something seems to require recognising the *modal* truth that we could not imagine it, thus threatening to lead to a vicious regress (Yablo 1993: sec. Vf.). Both observations speak against Hume's second claim that unimaginability is a guide to impossibility.

Furthermore, philosophers have objected against Hume's first claim by arguing that at least some impossibilities are conceivable – for example, that “any two sides of a triangle are together equal to the third” (Reid 1785/2002: ch. 4.3), that “Goldbach's conjecture is wrong”, or that “water is not H₂O” (Gendler and Hawthorne 2006: 10; see also Gendler 2000: 57). But it is not obvious that cases like these really speak against Hume's claims (Casullo 1979; Woudenberg 2006; Powell 2013). While we have no problems with understanding the sentences describing these alleged counterexamples, it is doubtful that we can really conceive of a concrete situation in which it is true that two sides of a triangle are not longer than the third, or that the stuff that we refer to as “water” is not identical with the stuff that we refer to as “H₂O” – especially if conceptions are understood as copies of perceptions and thus as being concerned exclusively with concrete objects. At best, it may be argued that there are cases – like the one involving Goldbach's conjecture – in which we cannot really determine whether something is conceivable or not (Woudenberg 2006), or in which we can conceive of something only as the result of deductive reasoning, thus losing the direct connection to perceptibility and, hence, also to possibility (e.g. when we remain ignorant about the fact that our premisses are ultimately contradictory).

Finally, Hume appears to challenge his own view. In a famous passage, he acknowledges that there are certain moral limitations to what we can imagine, given that “where vicious manners are described, without being marked with the proper characters of blame and disapprobation [...] [we] cannot, nor is it proper [we] should, enter into such sentiments” (Hume 1757/2008: § 32f.). When we encounter the views of others (notably in fictional works), we normally have no difficulties to imagine those views to be true, even if we take them to be false. For instance, in response to hearing Prometheus describing Earth as surrounded by the river Okeanos, we can easily imagine our planet as a flat disk (Aeschylus 2011: lines 206ff.). But, according to Hume, the situation is very different if we are concerned with normative opinions that are contrary to our own. In particular, Hume believes that we are both psychologically unable and normatively forbidden to imagine the adequacy of moral views that differ from our own (Gendler 2006: 54). We may resist, for example, imagining the moral permissiveness of randomly killing innocent children.

But such imaginative resistance threatens to undermine the claim that unconceivabil-

ity entails impossibility. For it is arguably (though not uncontroversially) possible that, in some very remote world, arbitrarily bringing about the death of innocent children is morally allowed or even required (Kölbel and Zeman 2012; MacFarlane 2014), even though we might be bound to fail in our attempts to imagine such a world. The most promising response in Hume's spirit is perhaps to maintain that the type of imagining that we resist engaging in is different from the type of imagining relevant for modal epistemology. It may be proposed, for instance, that, while we have no problem to dispassionately or hypothetically imagine that random killings of innocent children are moral, we are unable or unwilling to get more involved with this imaginative project (Moran 1994; Gendler 2006). In particular, since "a very violent effort is requisite to change our judgment of manners, and excite sentiments of approbation or blame, love or hatred, different from those to which the mind from long custom has been familiarized" (Hume 1757/2008: § 33), what we may be resistant to is the cognitive and emotional identification with the moral view that we imagine to be true, and not the mere imaginative assumption of its truth (Walton 1994: § IV).

5. Conclusion

The preceding considerations reveal that Hume's views on the imagination continue to have a significant influence on contemporary philosophy. First of all, his thoughts still serve as the starting point for discussions about modal knowledge and imaginative resistance (Gendler and Hawthorne 2002; Nichols 2006). Indeed, Hume's famous remarks on both topics have not merely shaped, but in fact initiated the respective debates (Yablo 1993; Moran 1994).

Then, the Neo-Humean views suggested at the end of sections 2 and 3 figure prominently in the current disputes about the nature of perception, episodic memory and imaginative experience. In particular, it is much discussed whether perceptions are relations (albeit to external objects), and whether episodic memories and imaginative experiences are representations of such relational perceptions (Peacocke 1985; Hopkins 1998: Ch. 7; Martin 2002). Similarly, there have been various recent attempts to define imaginative episodes in terms of their difference in functional or cognitive role from their perceptual

and judgemental counterparts (Van Leeuwen 2014; [Sinhbabu, *Imagination and Belief*]).

Finally, Hume's outlook is also methodologically very close to certain contemporary ones. Not only does he aim to establish a naturalistic 'science of human nature' which is based on the 'experimental method' of empirical observation (Introduction; 1.1.1.12). But he also pays much attention to, and engages in reflection on, introspective evidence – notably with respect to vivacity and assent. Hume even endorses the Cartesian idea that, “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” (1.4.2.7; see also 1.4.2.5 and Schmitt 2014: 71ff.). His approach to the mind thus combines empiricism and naturalism with what we nowadays call the phenomenological method ([Jansen, *Husserl*]; [Hopkins, *Sartre*]) – a combination which also appeals to many contemporary philosophers of mind and imagination (such as Martin 2001, 2002).⁷

Notes

¹ All references are to Hume (1739/2007), unless stated otherwise. The numbering system employed names, in this ordering, the book, part, section and, if applicable, paragraph of the passage referred to; or, in the case of the Appendix, just the paragraph.

² Hume is not always consistent in his conception of what he calls “perceptions”. While he typically takes them to be mental episodes or events (e.g. 3.1.1.2), he also sometimes describes them as the internal objects that such episodes directly present us with (1.4.5.15f.). A closely related ambiguity pertains to Hume's talk of “objects” (e.g. 1.1.7.4). Grene (1994) identifies three different uses which denote, respectively: (i) the direct objects of mental episodes; (ii) the objects of introspection, that is, the mental episodes themselves; (iii) the external referents of mental episodes. Hume clearly thinks that (iii) are entities distinct from the other two (1.2.6.7). By contrast, he tends to switch seamlessly between (i) and (ii), not the least because he takes the two to be inseparably linked to each other: (i) are internal objects that depend for their existence on (ii) and can be seen as constituents of (ii). In what follows, I assume that “perceptions” are mental episodes (ii), while “objects” are their mind-dependent objects (i).

³ See, e.g. 1.1.3.1, 1.3.5.5, 1.3.7.7, and 1.4.2.7; as well as Garrett 2008: 42. Dauer (1999: 83f., especially n. 1) compares this phenomenological reading of vivacity with Everson (1988)'s functionalist understanding; while Govier (1972) argues that there is a place for each interpretation. See also the discussion of Hume's notion of assent in § 3 below.

⁴ Note that Hume is likely to reject the idea that impressions and ideas can differ in determinacy (1.1.7.5). But this still leaves the possibility of differences in detail or intensity.

⁵ Which is what Traiger (2008: 59) seems to think. See also Russow (1980: 343) for discussion.

⁶ Other important differences are that only thought contents involve predicative attribution (Burge 2010: 544ff.), and that only thought contents are composed of elements that are subject to what Evans (1982) has called the “generality constraint”.

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Related Topics

Descartes; Sartre; Husserl; Imagination and Mental Imagery; Imagination and Belief; Imagination and Perception; Imagination and Memory; Contemporary Accounts of Imagination; Imaginative Resistance; Modal Epistemology

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Further Reading

A very comprehensive overview of Hume’s views on the nature and role of the imagination, as well as of their historical context, is provided by Cottrell (2015). Garrett (2008) and Traiger (2008) survey Hume’s thoughts on ideas, and on memory and imagination, respectively. Most other interesting works that are exclusively concerned with Hume’s

beliefs about the imagination are already a bit older, such as Jan Wilbank's book *Hume's Theory of the Imagination* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1968) and Gerhard Streminger's article of the same title (*Hume Studies* VI (1980): 91-118). Some more recent good discussions of Hume's view on the imagination and especially its epistemological role can be found in Garrett (1997: Ch. 1) and Allison (2008). Martin (2001, 2002) is one of the foremost proponents of a Neo-Humean theory of perception and episodic memory. Moran (1994) has introduced Hume's observations about imaginative resistance into contemporary discussion; while Yablo (1993) and the introduction in Gendler and Hawthorne (2002) explore the relevance of Hume's thoughts for present-day modal epistemology. Both issues are further discussed in the introduction and the parts III and IV of Nichols (2006).