**Hume’s Second Thoughts About Belief**

# A Confession of Minor Error

In the Appendix to the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry,* instead of saying that beliefs are phenomenologically vivid ideas, Hume says that they are ideas with a *sui generis* feeling.[[1]](#footnote-1) This is, I think, a change for the better. The second thoughts expressed in the Appendix mark a transition in his account of causal reasoning. He takes what had been an idiosyncratic account of the vivacity of mental imagery and turns it into a theory of how experiences determine credences in unobserved matters of fact.

The Appendix contains thirty-five paragraphs: an introduction, twelve paragraphs of second thoughts on personal identity, a paragraph that confesses “two other errors of less importance” (*T* App. ¶22), ten paragraphs that revisit the topic of belief, and thirteen paragraphs to be inserted in various places in Book 1. The confession of minor error both undermines Hume’s original argument for his account of belief and allows for a different account. The material that he tells the reader to insert in Book 1 shows how and why he modified his account his account of belief. The material at the beginning of the Appendix gives new arguments to justify his revised account, two of which make it into the first *Enquiry,* along with an appeal to introspection from the material to be inserted.

In his confession of minor error, Hume retracts the principle that perceptions with the same object only vary with respect to vivacity. He had asserted, “When you wou'd any way vary the idea of a particular object, you can only encrease or diminish its force and vivacity” (*T* 1.3.7.5). In the Appendix, he recants: “I believe there are other differences among ideas, which cannot properly be comprehended under these terms. Had I said, that two ideas of the same object can only be different by their different *feeling*, I shou'd have been nearer the truth” (*T* App. ¶22). So instead of saying that complex ideas of the same object can only vary by phenomenological vivacity, the new view is that they can vary by feeling, where this includes more possibilities than that.

# Material to be Inserted in Book 1

An explanation for this change of mind can be found in material in the Appendix, where Hume directs his readers to insert three paragraphs after his Book 1 discussion of how agitated animal spirits cause the insane to be more credulous. The first paragraph to be inserted begins, “we may observe the same effect of poetry in a lesser degree” (*T* 1.3.10.10). Because there already was a paragraph in that place beginning with those words, David and Mary Norton omit the earlier paragraph as having been made “redundant” (*T* p. 650). This strikes me as a reasonable editorial judgment.

We can compare the old paragraph to the new one and get a good picture of why Hume abandons the view that perceptions of the same object only vary along a single dimension of vivacity. The paragraph from 1739 presents vivid poetry and faint belief within in a uniform scale of vivacity. In that original paragraph, the difference between the insane person and the listener to poetry is “that the least reflection dissipates the illusions of poetry, and places the objects in their proper light. ’Tis however certain, that in the warmth of a poetical enthusiasm, a poet has a counterfeit belief, and even a kind of vision of his objects” (*T* p. 650). Here, in accordance with the principle that perceptions with the same object only differ along one dimension, Hume is presenting steps in a ladder of vivacity. Well-wrought poetical ideas are less vivid than beliefs, but, at the height of enthusiasm, poetry approaches belief.

In the new paragraph, Hume emphasizes that the feelings evoked by poetry are different in character from the feeling associated with belief and “the mind can easily distinguish betwixt the one and the other” (*T* 1.3.10.10). All the same passions can be evoked in life and in poetry, but the “*feelings* of the passions are very different when excited by poetical fictions, from what they are when they arise from belief and reality” (ibid.). Thus, “A passion, which is disagreeable in real life, may afford the highest entertainment in a tragedy, or epic poem” (ibid.).

In accordance with this distinction, Hume creates two tracks of vivacity, one for belief and one for poetry. On the one hand, “A poetical description may have a more sensible effect on the fancy, than an historical narration. It may collect more of those circumstances, that form a compleat image or picture. It may seem to set the object before us in more lively colours” (ibid.). So, for example, a gripping novel may cause us to form more vivid mental imagery than a list of purchases from a land registry. We can call the “more lively colors” associated with poetry “phenomenological vivacity.”

A second kind of vivacity is needed to explain belief, according to Hume, “Where the vivacity arises from a customary conjunction with a present impression; tho' the imagination may not, in appearance, be so much mov'd; yet there is always something more forcible and real in its actions, than in the fervors of poetry and eloquence” (ibid.). That is to say, when our ideas are vivified by the usual method of causal inference, even if we don’t form vivid mental pictures, the resulting ideas still have a kind of forcefulness that motivates us in a way that poetical fictions do not. As Justin Broackes writes, “it may well have been this objection that actually prompted Hume in the Appendix to the *Treatise* to renounce the view that the only way in which ideas may differ while still being ideas of the same object is in respect of force and vivacity . . . thus renouncing his first view of belief” (193-4).

The upshot is that the difference between contemplation and belief lies not in phenomenological vivacity, but rather in a distinctive feeling that constitutes the essence of belief. And, indeed, that’s the position taken in another paragraph in the Appendix Hume tells us should be added to the discussion of belief:

I conclude, by an induction which seems to me very evident, that an opinion or belief is nothing but an idea, that is different from a fiction, not in the nature, or the order of its parts, but in the manner of its being conceiv'd. But when I wou'd explain this manner, I scarce find any word that fully answers the case, but am oblig'd to have recourse to every one's feeling, in order to give him a perfect notion of this operation of the mind. An idea assented to feels different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness. This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination (*T* 1.3.7.7).

Hume gives us an argument from introspection that beliefs are ideas with a *sui generis* feeling.[[2]](#footnote-2) We can call this feeling “doxastic vivacity.”

Hume never asserts that belief is entirely independent of phenomenological vivacity. In “Of Tragedy,’ published in 1757, he endorses some of Fontenelle’s remarks on tragedy as a partial solution to the paradox of why spectators enjoy tragedies. According to Fontenelle, mild sorrows are pleasurable and conceiving of a situation as fictional diminishes the pains associated with it (Fontenelle, ‘*Reflexions*’163-4, quoted and translated in “Tragedy,” 218-9).[[3]](#footnote-3) Even if Hume thinks that the passions associated with a believed circumstance are always more vivid than the passions associated with a merely contemplated one, it doesn’t follow that every belief is phenomenologically more vivid than every contemplation of a fictional situation. The latter claim is what Hume denies in the new paragraph on poetic vivacity from the Appendix.

“If belief is a vivacious idea,” Louis Loeb (70) asks, “how can the lively products of poetic enthusiasm fail to count as beliefs?” The answer is that they wouldn’t. By the time he writes the Appendix, Hume no longer believes that perceptions of the same object only vary with respect to one sort of vivacity. This allows him to make belief into a *sui generis* feeling, and allows him to say that poetic enthusiasms can be more vivid in some respects without counting as a belief.

Hume begins one of the inserted paragraphs describing his new conception of belief with a declaration of originality: “This operation of the mind, which forms the belief of any matter of fact, seems hitherto to have been one of the greatest mysteries of philosophy; tho' no one has so much as suspected, that there was any difficulty in explaining it” (*T* 1.3.7.7). It isn’t true that Hume is the first to consider the question of how the mind forms beliefs about matters of fact. As Lewis Powell has observed, Locke begins the *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* by saying that his project is “to enquire into the Original, Certainty, and Extent of humane Knowledge: together with the Grounds and Degrees of Belief, Opinion, and Assent” (*Essay* 1.1.2).[[4]](#footnote-4) What’s original to Hume is that he is the first to think of beliefs as a kind of idea, and this leads him to new problems, which no one else has considered.[[5]](#footnote-5) It’s easy to sympathize with his situation. He’s trying to draw fine distinctions between the ways that the vivacity of ideas may constitute the nature of belief, and no one in the tradition is giving him any help at all.

According to Trudy Govier, Hume’s point in his discussion of poetical fictions is to distinguish between force and vivacity (46-7). This doesn’t seem to be well put. After all, as Anthony Nguyen observes (73), in *Treatise* 1.3.7.7, Hume makes it clear that he’s using and ‘vivacity’ and ‘force’ as variant terms that apply to the relevant feeling in this context. But what Govier means by vivacity is *being painted in more distinct colors,* which is what I’ve called phenomenological vivacity, and what she means by force is *assent,* which is what I’ve called doxastic vivacity. That is the distinction that Hume is drawing, and his point that these are distinct, independent feelings that can inhere in a conception and that each allows of stronger and weaker degrees.

My reading is something like Kaveh Kamooneh’s (2003), according to whom Hume has a “double-aspect account of vivacity,” and perceptions can be vivid either phenomologically or with respect to a quality that determines action (42). He appeals to Hume’s new treatment of poetical vivacity in the Appendix to justify this reading (46, 49). For Kamooneh, however, the second track is a disposition rather than a distinct feeling that explains the causal differences between boring belief and poetic raptures (42). Jennifer Smalligan Marušić gives good reasons against this (171-2) and other dispositional interpretations of Hume on belief. In the dispute between Marušić and her opponents, all the texts are on her side.

David Owen has a slightly different understanding of the upshot of Hume’s second minor concession. Instead of reading it as an abandonment of the principle that perceptions of the same object only vary with respect to vivacity, he takes Hume’s point to be “that it is certainly feeling that differentiates beliefs from ideas, but that . . . feeling is not adequately characterized as the very thing which distinguishes impressions from ideas, i.e. force and vivacity” (173). This is close to right, but I think that the passages we’ve been considering shows that Hume doesn’t jettison talk of force and vivacity. Hume says that belief is a distinctive kind of feeling and then he says that he tries to explain this feeling “by calling it a superior *force*, or *vivacity*, or *solidity*, or *firmness*, or *steadiness*” (*T* 1.3.7.7). And the characterization of beliefs as conceptions with more force or firmness runs throughout the added material in the Appendix (*T* App. ¶¶3, 5-9). Belief is a distinctive kind of feeling for Hume in the Appendix, but it’s a feeling that comes with a certain degree of force and firmness. When we have an impression of an object that’s been customarily associated with another object, “the idea of its usual attendant immediately strikes us, as something real and solid” (*T* App. ¶9). This idea, Hume tells us, “approaches the impression, from which it is deriv'd, in its force and influence” (*T* App. ¶9, cf. Appendix ¶3), which tells us that the impression has the relevant kind of force and influence as well. As Don Garrett observes, “that memories and beliefs are perceptions having a feature in *some* degree that impressions have in a *greater* degree is one of Hume’s most distinctive doctrines” (43).

Emily Kress has argued against attributing to Hume a distinction between two sorts of vivacity. She concedes that Hume says in the inserted passage on poetic enthusiasm that the vivacity bestowed on our ideas by poetry “never has the same *feeling,* which arises in the mind, when we reason” (*T* 1.3.10.10) and grants that this suggests “a distinction between two kinds of vivacity: the vivacity that characterizes belief and the vivacity that characterizes counterfeit belief,” that is, poetic enthusiasm (66). She gives two replies to this obvious solution, one tied to the 1739 version of the text and one that seems to me to either beg the question or to be counter-productive to her position.

The reply tied to the 1739 version of the text is that a distinction between two sorts of vivacity “appeals to a distinction that plays no role in Hume’s official definition of belief, which defined belief only as an idea with force and vivacity. This definition did not present belief as an idea having a *particular kind* of force or vivacity” (66). That’s true of Hume’s original definition of belief in *Treatise* 1.3.7.5, but it isn’t true of the revised account of belief that Hume gives in the beginning of the Appendix (“*belief is nothing but a peculiar feeling, different from the simple conception*” *T* App. ¶3). In a footnote, Kress gives some reasons for thinking that Hume didn’t change his mind on the topic of belief (85n29), but she neglects Hume’s confession of error, where, as we have seen, he says that he was mistaken in saying that two ideas with the same object can only differ with respect to vivacity and that he should have said they can only differ with respect to feeling (*T* App ¶22). The rejected doctrine is a crucial premise in Hume’s argument that beliefs are vivid ideas, and the proposed replacement makes room for the doctrine that there are two sorts of vivacity at work in beliefs and poetical fictions, which is the question at issue.

Kress’s second reply to the solution is “Hume seems to be arguing that what grounds the distinction between the vivacity of poetry and of belief is the origin of that vivacity, and that any phenomenological differences in “feeling” only arise from our observation of that causal origin” (67). Of course, a phenomenological difference with a particular origin is still a phenomenological difference, so this hardly undermines the claim that there are two sorts of vivacity at work. A little later she says that the vivacity of poetical fictions is “the phenomenological property in virtue of which an idea is a belief” (68) which begs the question against her opponent. The doctrine on the surface of Hume’s text is that the vivacity of poetical fictions is not the vivacity that makes for beliefs, since we don’t believe the fictions.

Martin Bell has an account of the development of Hume’s views on beliefs from the *Treatise* to the first *Enquiry* that’s similar to mine*,* but he tells a different story about what provokes this development. In the *Treatise,* Hume writes, “Contiguity and resemblance have an effect much inferior to causation; but still have some effect, and augment the conviction of any opinion, and the vivacity of any conception” (*T* 1.3.9.8). According to Bell, Hume is here emphasizing the distinction between conviction and vivacity and, in the surrounding text, is making the point that “these *feel* different, and that difference is not captured by a definition of the theoretical dimension of force and vivacity” (180). This thought plants the seed for Hume’s later thought that belief is something other than a vivid idea. I don’t think that the text justifies Bell’s claim, and it seems to me that we have a better paper trail in Hume’s discussion of poetic vivacity. In the 1739 version of *Treatise* 1.3.10.10, poetic fictions are always less vivid than belief. In the material that we are directed to replace that passage with, poetic fictions are more vivid in one respect, but not in another. Still, Bell (178-9) is right to argue that in the *Enquiry,* Hume distinguishes belief from other sorts of vivacity in a way that he hadn’t the official treatment of belief in the *Treatise,* and that’s the central thing.

Hume’s second thoughts strike me as being his better thoughts. It isn’t plausible to suppose that every belief (e.g. the belief that Dover is the capital of Delaware) is phenomenologically more vivid than every fiction (e.g the imagined event that Dracula bites Lucy). Insofar as the first state strikes us more forcefully than the second, it’s only that we believe in the first state of affairs and not in the second.

# New Arguments that Belief is a Feeling

The doctrine that Hume retracts in his confession of minor error is an essential premise in the main argument that he offers us for his original account of belief:

When you wou'd any way vary the idea of a particular object, you can only encrease or diminish its force and vivacity. If you make any other change on it, it represents a different object or impression. The case is the same as in colours. A particular shade of any colour may acquire a new degree of liveliness or brightness without any other variation. But when you produce any other variation, 'tis no longer the same shade or colour. So that as belief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity (*T* 1.3.7.5).

The example isn’t entirely persuasive, since one might think changes in brightness entail changes in color, as Daniel Flage (169) has argued. Still, Hume’s argument is clear: belief and contemplation are ideas, belief differs in some respect from contemplation but can have the same object, the only dimension along which two perceptions of the same object can vary is vivacity, so beliefs differ from contemplation with respect to vivacity.

Once Hume abandons the doctrine that perceptions of the same object only vary with respect to vivacity, he owes us new arguments for the claim that belief is a way that ideas are felt.

In the beginning of the Appendix, Hume provides these required new arguments for the conclusion that belief “is merely a peculiar feeling or sentiment” (*T* App. ¶2).

He proceeds by arguing against two alternative views. First, he argues against the possibility that belief is some idea “such as that of reality or existence” which we annex to our idea of the object, (*T* App. ¶2). Second, he argues against the possibility that a belief is a distinguishable impression attached to the idea of an object (*T* App. ¶¶4-7).

Hume gives two arguments against thinking that believing is a matter of annexing the idea of existence or something like it to the idea of an object. First, “we have no abstract idea of existence, distinguishable and separable from the idea of particular objects” (*T* App. ¶2; Hansen 291). Second, and more generically, belief can’t be an idea that we attach to other ideas since, if it were, we could believe anything we wanted: “The mind has the command over all its ideas, and can separate, unite, mix, and vary them, as it pleases; so that if belief consists merely in a new idea, annex’d to the conception, it wou’d be in a man’s power to believe what he pleas’d” (*T* App. ¶2). It isn’t within our power to believe whatever we please, so belief isn’t an idea annexed to our idea of a situation (Hansen 291).

In the Abstract, which appears a little before the Appendix, Hume says that “there are only two hypotheses” to account for the nature of belief (Abstract ¶19). Either it consists in an annexed idea, or it consists in “a different manner of conceiving an object” (Abstract ¶21). Hume gives two arguments against the first possibility, including an argument that appeals to the involuntariness of belief, and concludes that the second option is the right account (Abstract ¶¶19-20).

In the Appendix, Hume considers a new, third hypothesis, that belief “consists in some impression or feeling, distinguishable from the conception,” (*T* App. ¶4). In the Appendix, on the way to establishing his own thesis that belief is a feeling that inheres in an idea, he gives what I would count as five arguments against the hypothesis that belief consists in an annexed impression.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It’s a little difficult to distinguish between the view that Hume is attacking and the view that Hume is defending here. He wants to show that the difference between a belief and a mere conception “consists merely in a certain feeling or sentiment” (*T* App. ¶2). The view he is criticizing is

that belief, beside the simple conception, consists in some impression or feeling, distinguishable from the conception. It does not modify the conception, and render it more present and intense: It is only annex'd to it, after the same manner that *will* and *desire* are annex'd to particular conceptions of good and pleasure (*T* App. ¶4).

If his point were that the annexation is loose enough to be broken by an act of will, then he could offer the same argument against this possibility that he did against the hypothesis that belief consists in an annexed idea. On this account, belief should be voluntary, but belief is involuntary, so this account must be mistaken. He doesn’t, however, argue in this way, so that doesn’t seem to be his point.

Hume seems to be thinking that in his preferred view, the feeling of belief is internal to the relevant idea whereas in the view that he’s rejecting, the feeling is merely inseparably annexed to the idea. It’s not obvious to me, however, what this difference amounts to. The point can’t be that, on the view that Hume is criticizing, the impression of belief is spatially external to the relevant conception, as if it might be to the left or the right. But if that isn’t the difference, it isn’t clear what the difference is. Before March 15th, Cassius had a will and a desire that Caesar be assassinated. After March 15th, he had the belief that Caesar had been assassinated. Wherein constitutes the difference between the belief in that conception and desire for that same conception?

Of the five arguments that Hume offers under the heading of replies to the rival view, only two of them directly target it. Because it’s not clear what the difference between the view that Hume is attacking and the view that Hume is defending, his criticisms of the rival view seem as if they might apply to his own view as well.

The first argument is that reasoning produces beliefs, but reasoning doesn’t produce impressions: “nothing ever enters into our *conclusions* but ideas, or our fainter conceptions” (*T* App. ¶4). But if reasoning never gives rise to a new impression, then how can it give rise to a new feeling?

Hume’s second argument is that it’s “the subject of plain experience” that “no distinct impression attends every” belief. (*T* App. ¶4). He grants that there is a pleasurable feeling of tranquility when we move from agitated doubt to a settled, satisfying conclusion (*T* App. ¶4). Even so, he argues, in more usual cases of belief formation, for example, where we see only legs but infer the existence of the rest of the body, we believe that whole human exists without any such pleasant feeling (*T* App. ¶4). I am sympathetic to the doctrine that there’s no distinctive feeling that attends each and every belief. Nevertheless, that’s the view that he commits himself when he asserts “when we are convinc'd of any matter of fact, we do nothing but conceive it, along with a certain feeling, different from what attends the mere *reveries* of the imagination” (*T* App. ¶2).

Although the next three arguments are presented as criticisms of the rival account that beliefs might be attached impressions, Hume could have offered them as arguments that stand on their own. These three arguments appeal to the explanatory virtues of his account. One appeals to his success is giving the causal antecedents to belief:

We can explain the *causes* of the firm conception, but not those of any separate impression. And not only so, but the causes of the firm conception exhaust the whole subject, and nothing is left to produce any other effect. An inference concerning a matter of fact is nothing but the idea of an object, that is frequently conjoin'd, or is associated with a present impression. This is the whole of it. Every part is requisite to explain, from analogy, the more steady conception; and nothing remains capable of producing any distinct impression (*T* App. ¶6)

On Hume’s principles, constant conjunction explains the generation of a principle of association, and vivacity is transferred across associated perception (*T* 1.3.6.15). Given these principles, after we observe two sorts of events as constantly conjoined, having the impression of one will lead to the doxastically vivified idea of the other. These antecedents will not, according to Hume, explain the production of the separable impression.

Hume also argues that his account can explain the consequences of belief, in a way that analysis of belief as a separable impression cannot:

The *effects* of belief, in influencing the passions and imagination, can all be explain'd from the firm conception; and there is no occasion to have recourse to any other principle. These arguments, with many others, enumerated in the foregoing volumes, sufficiently prove, that belief only modifies the idea or conception; and renders it different to the feeling, without producing any distinct impression (*T* App. ¶7).

Most importantly for Hume, belief motivates us in a way that idle contemplation does not (*T* 1.3.10.3). Other examples of his drawing consequences from beliefs are scattered throughout the *Treatise.* So, for instance judgments about “our own worth and character . . . are always attended with passion” (*T* 2.1.11.9). “When good is certain or probable,” Hume writes, “it produces joy,” and, he continues, “When evil is in the same situation there arises grief or sorrow” (*T* 2.3.9.5). We don’t take pleasure in listening to the conversation people we think are liars, “and that because those ideas they present to us, not being attended with belief, make no impression upon the mind” (*T* 1.3.10.5). Hume thinks that he can explain the paradox of tragedy, since tragic events produce different passions when we believe that those events occurred than they do when presented to us in fiction (*T* 1.3.10.10).

Hume appeals to Ockham’s razor in another argument against the view that belief is a impression annexed to an idea. He moves from the premise that mind has “a firmer hold, or more steady conception of what it takes to be a matter of fact, than of fictions” to the conclusion that that’s all that belief is, since we shouldn’t “multiply suppositions without necessity” (*T* App. ¶5). This argument won’t persuade anyone who doesn’t already think that beliefs are all and only those conceptions that are more firmly held than those of fiction. And, even if you do think that this account is extensionally correct, you might still hold out for a better, explanatory account for your definition of belief.

Hume’s thought in these arguments is that the explanatory virtues of his account justify us in believing it. I do believe that his account of causal inference is a great achievement in the history of psychology. The psychological principles he offers gives a plausible first description of the mechanisms underlying our unreflective inferences concerning unobserved matters of fact, and that is a project that hadn’t been considered before.

Owen rightly observes that on his interpretation of Hume’s second thoughts on belief, according to which the connection between belief and vivacity is entirely broken, we lose “the picture of a unified reality of memory, sense impressions, and belief, and the characterization of probable reasoning as a species of sensation” (174). Indeed, if Hume stopped thinking that vivacity had anything to do with belief, he couldn’t appeal to the principle that vivacity spreads across associated perceptions to explain how we come to believe in unobserved matters of fact. But, I say, Hume’s later view is that belief is a kind of vivacity, that impressions have this sort of vivacity, and that this sort of vivacity spreads across associated perceptions. He gives us an argument from introspection that the vivacity in belief is analogous to a feature of impressions:

Now that there is a greater firmness and solidity in the conceptions, which are the objects of conviction and assurance, than in the loose and indolent reveries of a castle-builder, every one will readily own. They strike upon us with more force; they are more present to us; the mind has a firmer hold of them, and is more actuated and mov'd by them. It acquiesces in them; and, in a manner, fixes and reposes itself on them. In short, they approach nearer to the impressions, which are immediately present to us and are therefore analogous to many other operations of the mind (*T* App. ¶3).

The firmness and solidity that we find in our beliefs is a feature that impressions have to a greater degree. Hume’s later distinction between kinds of vivacity is an improvement in his view and not anything that undermines the integrity of his system.

Having said that, I do think that it’s important to distinguish between the explanatory power of Hume’s whole system and the explanatory power of his particular thesis that belief is a particular sort of forceful idea. The whole system consists of a web of causal connections between impressions and associations, between associations and the spread of belief, and between belief and passions and volitions. That system has, I think, a lot of explanatory power, but what exactly goes in the nodes of the web doesn’t matter so much. The thesis that a belief in forthcoming pleasure causes joy and the belief in forthcoming pain causes grief isn’t original to Hume. It can be found in Hobbes and Locke (*Leviathan* 122; *Essay* 2.20.7), and it’s independent of any particular account of belief.

Hume’s simile that vivacity that carried across associated perceptions as if by pipes or canals is evocative (*T* 1.3.10.7, *T* 2.2.9.14), and it effectively clarifies his doctrine that vivacity spreads across associated perceptions. But it isn’t an explanatory piece of theory, and it’s compatible with pictures that aren’t his own. So, Hume is imagining vivacity spreading from impressions of the cause to our ideas of the effect, making the ideas be relatively more vivid. As an alternative, however, we could imagine that the pipes carry vivacity to a new, annexed impression (Flage 179-80).

Nor do Hume’s speculative physiological speculations about animal spirits do much to bolster his particular account of belief. Even if it were true that there were animal spirits, that is, even if there were rarified fluids running through our nerves, and even if it were true that these spirits were more agitated when we believe than when we merely conceive, it still wouldn’t follow that beliefs are a kind of forceful conception of an idea rather than an annexed impression. To get to that conclusion we would need bridge principles connecting animal spirits and ideas, principles that Hume isn’t inclined to offer and, if he did offer them, would only be arbitrary inventions. The most that his account of belief as a kind of vivid idea could be thought to explain is the subjective appearance of belief. But it’s not obvious that beliefs have any sort of uniform appearance, so it’s not obvious that this is a virtue at all.

We might worry that by moving from phenomenological vivacity to doxastic vivacity, Hume’s account of belief becomes trivial. Someone might reply to the triviality objection that Hume’s view still carries difficulties with it. He is still committed to the doctrine that belief is associated with an image, to the doctrine that belief is a feeling, and to the doctrine that belief is an inner representation, and there are reasonable objections that a philosopher might levy against all of these views.

Alternatively, someone else might point to the substance of the wider theory in which Hume’s account of belief is embedded. In addition to maintaining that belief is a *sui generis* feeling, he also maintains that this feeling is spread across associated perceptions and that the association of cause and effect between perceptions is established by experiences of constant conjunction. Even if his account of belief were trivial, the wider theory of cognitive associationism it is a part of is not.

# Belief in the First *Enquiry*

In the first *Enquiry*, Hume improves on the account of belief presented in the Appendix in two respects. First, he gets rid of the false subtlety of treating the hypothesis that beliefs are annexed impressions as a true rival of his own theory of belief. Second, he gives a more sophisticated account of the explanatory role of his account of belief.

In the *Enquiry*, Hume keeps the argument from introspection for the conclusion that belief is distinguished from fiction by a *sui generis* feeling. He again justifies this claim with an appeal to introspection:

Were we to attempt a *definition* of this sentiment, we should, perhaps, find it a very difficult, if not an impossible task; in the same manner as if we should endeavour to define the feeling of cold or passion of anger, to a creature who never had any experience of these sentiments. Belief is the true and proper name of this feeling; and no one is ever at a loss to know the meaning of that term; because every man is every moment conscious of the sentiment represented by it (*EHU* 5.12).

Belief is a manner in which some ideas are presented, and the feeling is indefinable except by inner ostension. Though he can’t define the relevant feeling, he can “attempt a *description* of this sentiment” (*EHU* 5.12), where description doesn’t give necessary and sufficient conditions. His descriptive remark is that beliefs come with a certain sort of vivacity: “belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object” (*EHU* 5.12).

In the Abstract, Hume considers one alternative to his preferred account of belief. In the Appendix he considers two. In the first *Enquiry,* he goes back to considering only one alternative, namely, that belief might be an idea annexed to a conception and separable from it. Against this view, he repeats an argument that he had offered in the Abstract and in the Appendix: if belief were an annexed idea of this sort, then belief would be voluntary, and belief isn’t voluntary. Belief, he tells us,

lies not merely in any peculiar idea, which is annexed to such a conception as commands our assent, and which is wanting to every known fiction. For as the mind has authority over all its ideas, it could voluntarily annex this particular idea to any fiction, and consequently be able to believe whatever it pleases; contrary to what we find by daily experience (*EHU* 5.10)

Hume concludes, “It follows, therefore, that the difference between fiction and belief lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure” (*EHU* 5.11).

Instead of criticizing the view that belief is an inseparably annexed impression, Hume seems to endorse it in the *Enquiry.* “The difference between *fiction* and *belief*,” he writes, “lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former, and which depends not on the will, nor can be commanded at pleasure” (*EHU* 5.11). He follows this up, however, by saying “belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the *manner* of their conception” (*EHU* 5.12, cf. *EHU* 5.13), which suggests that he thinks of the relevant feeling as being internal to our ideas

According the Stacy Hansen and Daniel Flage, in the *Enquiry,* Hume comes to accept the view that he had attacked in the Appendix, the view that belief consists in an annexed impression. Hansen writes, “Hume has come to realize that the state of believing an idea includes the way one feels about the idea, the internal sensation which arises when that idea is brought to mind” (299, cf. Flage 181-2). According to Michael Gorman, Hume’s talk in the *Enquiry* of the difference between mere conception and belief consisting in an annexed feeling lends support to Hansen and Flage’s interpretation, but this passage is something of a lapse, and “Hume soon returns to discussing belief as if the manner of conception or feeling were internal to the belief-idea” (94).

I think that when he writes the *Enquiry,* Hume comes to realize that there isn’t an important and intelligible distinction between the doctrine that belief is an impression annexed to an idea and the doctrine that it’s an idea conceived with a certain feeling. First, there isn’t an important difference between the two doctrines. Second, if Hume still thought when he wrote the *Enquiry* that there were an important difference between these two doctrines, then he would have argued against the doctrine that he thought was mistaken. Third, in the *Enquiry,* he uses both language that suggests that belief is an idea with annexed impression and language that suggests that belief is an idea conceived in a certain manner.

In the Appendix, Hume argues that the explanatory power of his account of beliefs as ideas with a certain sort of vivacity helps to justify that account. That argument is implicitly carried forward to the structure of section 5 of the first *Enquiry*. Section 5 has two parts, the first descriptive and the second explanatory. Hume’s account of beliefs as vivid ideas is part of the explanatory hypothesis of part 2. The *Enquiry’s* account is an improvement insofar as it makes clear that his account of belief is only explanatory insofar as it is conjoined with an account of the spread of vivacity across our perceptions of cause and effect.

In the beginning of the *Enquiry,* Hume defends the possibility of a science of human nature proceeding through one of two approaches. The first approach distinguishes mental faculties and reflects upon them. Since, “what is really distinct to the immediate perception may be distinguished by reflection” it follows that “that there is a truth and falsehood in all propositions on this subject, and a truth and falsehood, which lie not beyond the compass of human understanding” (*EHU* 1.14). Frances Hutcheson and Joseph Butler succeeded in this approach, which “may give us a juster notion of the certainty and solidity of this branch of learning” (*EHU* 1.14).[[7]](#footnote-7) The approach to the science of man corresponds to what Hume does in part 1 of section 5. We have a faculty that makes inferences on unobserved matters of fact. We reflect upon it, and we discover that when we observe two sorts of things being constantly conjoined, the observation of one leads to the expectation of the other (*EHU* 5.8).

In the introductory section of the *Enquiry,* Hume takes inspiration from Newton and raises hopes for a second approach to the science of man, one that can provide a deeper understanding of the mind and which goes beyond surface descriptions. The original approach of astronomers was to prove “from the phænomena, the true motions, order, and magnitude of the heavenly bodies,” (*EHU* 1.15). Then Newton “determined the laws and forces, by which the revolutions of the planets are governed and directed” (*EHU* 1.15). The analogous hope would be to discover the laws and forces that govern the operations of mind.

The only place that Hume claims to have possibly discovered a general law governing the operations of the mind is in the part 2 of section 5, where he tells us that if the principle that vivacity spreads across associated perceptions can be confirmed, then “this may be established as a general law, which takes place in all the operations of the mind” (*EHU* 5.14).[[8]](#footnote-8) In part 2, Hume repeats material from the Appendix giving his account of belief as a *sui generis* feeling (*EHU* 5.12=*T* 1.3.7.7) and repeats some of the arguments that he offered in the *Treatise* for thinking that vivacity spreads across associated perceptions (*EHU* 5.15-17=*T* 1.3.8.3-6).[[9]](#footnote-9) If belief is a sort of vivacity, if associations are established by constant conjunctions, and if each sort of vivacity is spread across associated perceptions, then he will have explained the probable inferences described in the first part.

Somewhat remarkably, Hume describes part 2 of the section 5, as optional and speculative in a way that part 1 is not. For readers who don’t like uncertain speculations, “the remaining part of this section is not calculated for them, and the following enquiries may well be understood, though it be neglected” (*EHU* 5.9). Part 2 is offered for those who “love the abstract sciences, and can be entertained with speculations, which, however accurate, may still retain a degree of doubt and uncertainty” (*EHU* 5.9). In a letter to John Stewart, Hume says that a great defect in the *Treatise* is its overconfidence: “the positive Air, which prevails in that Book, & which may be imputed to the Ardor of Youth, so much displeases me, that I have not Patience to review it” (*Letters* 1.187). Distinguishing between a secure description of causal inferences and a more conjectural explanation of the mechanism behind those inferences is a way of revising the argument to be more epistemically modest.

Consider Hume’s implication that part 1, unlike part 2, is needed for understanding the rest of the *Enquiry.* The *Enquiry* is a controversial text, and different people will draw connections in different ways. I would say the analysis of causation in section 7 of the *Enquiry* falls out of the account of causal inference in part 1 of section 5: given that account of our causal inferences, we will judge that Ps cause Qs when Ps are constantly conjoined with Qs. The argument for universal causal determinism in section 8 rests in part on the low requirements for causal connections established in section 7. In section 9 Hume defends his description of human probable reasoning from part 1 of section 5 by comparing it to animal reasoning.

On the descriptive account from part 1 of section 5, our faculty of probable inference will tell us that unobserved cases are like observed cases. In accordance with that implication, Hume argues in section 10 that we should expect the law-governed character of matters that fall under our observation to be extended universally and in section 11 that we shouldn’t expect a future life that’s radically unlike the present one. In section 12, Hume gives a kind of vindication of probable inference as described in part 1 of section 5: the Cartesian project of doubting our faculties until we can find an independent foundation for them is hopeless, we can’t suspend our faculty of probable judgment, and if we did, it would kill us. All of these arguments depend, in one way or another, on the description of part 1 of section 5. None of them depend on the hypothetical explanation of part 2. If a different explanation turns out to be right, the arguments of the rest of the *Enquiry* should still work.

I concede that the account of belief as a sort of vivacity, capable of degrees, and which spreads across associations established by experience does support the account of probability in section 6 of the first *Enquiry*. Even in that case, however, I don’t know that those hypotheses are necessary prerequisites for Hume’s considered account of probability.

The optional and speculative character of part 2 of section 5, along with his tentative claim to have discovered a law of the science of man, provides us with Hume’s considered view of the point of his theory of belief. It’s a central part of his explanation of the basic mechanism of our reasoning about unobserved matters of fact.

So, to sum up, we may count three arguments in the *Enquiry* for the thesis that beliefs are ideas accompanied by a certain feeling. The first is an argument from introspection: when we look inward at our believed conceptions, we find a distinct feeling. The second is an indirect deductive argument: the alternative to his account of belief is that beliefs are ideas with annexed ideas, but if that account were true, then belief would be voluntary. The third argument is an inference to the best explanation. Hume offers us a theory with three principles: first, that belief is an idea with a certain kind of vivacity, second, that customary repetition establishes a kind of association between perceptions, and third, a proposed law that vivacity spreads across associated ideas. These three principles explain how the observation of constantly conjoined sorts of things leads us to believe in the existence of one from the impression of the other. Insofar as this is a good explanation, it gives us reason to believe in the elements of the explanation.

Hume does not repeat his argument from the *Treatise* for the thesis that beliefs are vivid ideas. According to that argument, since perceptions of the same object only vary with respect to vivacity along a single dimension, the difference between belief and mere conception must consist in vivacity. That argument rests on a premise that he rejects in the Appendix to the *Treatise* because experience of poetic fictions shows that there’s more than one sort of cognitive vivacity.

**Works from Before 1800**

Abstract David Hume, “An Abstract of a Book lately Published, entituled, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* &c.,” in *T,* vol. 1

*Leviathan* Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan,* edited by C. B. Macpherson, Harmondsworth, Middlesex: Pelican Books. 1968.

*Essay* John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,* edited by Peter Nidditch, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975

*EHU* David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding,* edited by Tom L. Beauchamp. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 1999

*Letters* David Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, 2 vols., ed. J.Y.T. Grieg. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1932.

“Reflexions” “Reflexions sur la Poetique,” in *Œuvres de Monsieur de Fontenelle*, 8 volumes, vol. 3. Paris: Chez Burnet, 1742.

*T* David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* edited by David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2 volumes, 2007

“Tragedy” David Hume, “Of Tragedy,” in *Essays: Moral, Political, and Literary,* edited by Eugene F. Miller. Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1985.

**Works from After 1800**

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Powell, Lewis. “What is Hume’s ‘New Question’?,” paper presented virtually at the International Hume Society Meeting, Bogota, Colombia, July 6-11, 2021.

1. I got helpful comments on an early version of this material from Mike Dacey, Cameron Buckner, and Talia Morag. I gave this paper at the Hume Society Conference in Prague in 2022, with excellent comments from Jason Fisette and excellent questions from the audience. I received useful feedback, both in and out of that session, from David Owen. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Citing texts from the abstract, the Appendix, and the first *Enquiry,* John Laird (432-5) emphasizes the *sui generis* character of Hume’s feeling of belief. The doctrine that belief is constituted by a *sui generis* feeling, definable only by inner ostension, first appears in the Abstract, published a few months before the Appendix: “Our author proceeds to explain the manner or feeling, which renders belief different from a loose conception. He seems sensible, that 'tis impossible by words to describe this feeling, which every one must be conscious of in his own breast” (Abstract ¶22). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Though Hume endorses Fontenelle’s analysis as a partial solution to the Paradox of Tragedy, he also offers his own supplemental solution to the problem, and the absence of belief doesn’t figure in his original contribution. He illustrates his solution with an example from Cicero’s prosecutorial oration against Verres, an example in which sadness over unjust executions is not “softened by fiction” (“Tragedy” 219; Hill 320, Neill 336-7). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Powell made the observation in the question and answer period after his presentation of his paper at the virtual 2020/21 Hume Society Meeting, anchored in Bogota, Colombia. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Powell takes Hume’s new question to be what differentiates the conceptions that are beliefs from those that aren’t (2). David Owen (2003 21-23) gives three more answers. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Hume presents these as four arguments (‘firstly,’ ‘secondly,’ ‘thirdly,’ ‘fourthly,’) combining my first two arguments into one. Stacy Hansen gives a good exposition of these arguments (292-3). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. The 1748 and 1750 editions have a footnote (*EHU* pp. 232-3) that make it explicit that Hume has Hutcheson and Butler in mind [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This is mostly a verbal point about Hume’s use of the expression ‘law’. Perhaps, he would be willing to use the term for the Copy Principle and for the three principles governing different sorts of association of ideas. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. On the minor variations between these texts, see pp. lxv-lxvii of *EHU.* [↑](#footnote-ref-9)