

Hume section 2: squashed

The following is a summary¹ of what Hume says in Section II of the Enquiry

SECTION II OF the ORIGIN of IDEAS

Everyone will readily allow, that there is considerable difference between perceptions of the mind, like when a man feels heat, and when he afterwards recalls the memory of this sensation. If you tell me that any person is in love, I easily understand your meaning, but can never mistake that conception for the real passion, for even the colours of poetry can never paint natural objects.

Therefore, we may divide perceptions into two classes. The less forcible and lively are commonly called Thoughts or Ideas. The other species I call Impressions, employing the word in a sense somewhat different from usual to mean the more lively perceptions as when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate.

When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas gold and mountain, with which we are already acquainted. We can conceive of a virtuous horse because we can conceive of virtue and unite it with the shape of a horse. Even the idea of God arises from our reflecting on the operation of our own minds and augmenting its qualities without limit. To express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas are copies of impressions.

We always find that every idea is copied from a similar impression. Those who would disagree have only one, easy, method of refuting this: let them produce an idea which is not derived from this source.

There is, however, just one phenomenon which may prove that it is not absolutely impossible for ideas to arise independent of impressions. Suppose a person, enjoying good sight, be presented with all the shades of blue from the deepest to the lightest, except a single one. Even if he has never had fortune to meet with the missing shade I believe it will be possible for him to imagine it. However, this instance is so singular that it does not merit that we alter our general maxim.

Here, therefore, is a proposition which may banish jargon and make every dispute equally intelligible: When we entertain any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without meaning or idea (as is too frequent), we need but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived?

¹ Squashed Philosophers - Glyn Hughes (<http://sqapo.com/hume.htm>)