

Section II: Of the Origin of Ideas

n.b. the paragraph numbers below refer to our class text and may not correspond to other editions of the Enquiries.

Paragraph 1.

- a. What is a 'perception of the mind'? n.b. the answer is not given in the text.

Any activity of the mind of which we are aware.

Paragraph 3.

- a. Hume says, 'we can divide the mind's perceptions into two classes'. He names these as:

Impressions and ideas (or thoughts)

- b. What is the distinguishing feature of these two classes of perception?

Their different degrees of force and liveliness

Paragraph 1.

- a. What mental activities are associated with each class of perception?

Impressions are related to the senses (but see para two);

Ideas are related to memory and imagination

Paragraph 2.

- a. How are these two classes of perception related to each other?

Our thought (ideas) is 'a faithful mirror' that copies our sensations and feelings (impressions).

Paragraph 1.

- a. What example does Hume use in paragraph one to illustrate the two classes?

The pain of excessive heat and the pleasure of moderate warmth experienced compared to being remembered or looked forward to by the imagination.

Paragraph 2.

- a. What two examples does Hume use in paragraph two to illustrate the two classes?

Anger and love

- b. How do the examples in this paragraph differ from the example in paragraph one?

When the person is asleep or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

These are feelings rather than sensations

Paragraph 1.

- a. What two exceptions does Hume allow which suggests he is intending his analysis to be good only in normal circumstances?

Disease and madness,

Think for yourself

- a. Hume has to invent a name for one of the classes. Give one reason why this might be a good name and one reason why it might be a misleading name.

Impression might suggest something pressing forcefully against something else leaving a mark 'impressed' on the surface; these days it can sometimes suggest having a vague notion of something.

- b. Is Hume correct in only allowing two exceptions? What others might be added?

When the person is asleep or under the influence of alcohol or other drugs.

- c. Does allowing exceptions cause a problem for Hume. Give one reason why it might and one reason why it might not.

It might cause a problem in that he really wants the distinction to be drawn on the basis of their force and liveliness. If there are exceptions to this then the memory of a vivid idea that originated during an unusual circumstance might be indistinguishable from a memory based on a normal impression. On the other hand vivid ideas in dreams do themselves seem to be traceable back to previous impressions. To bolster his position Hume might have to provide some criteria for normality and for exceptions, e.g. usefulness. The drug addict who runs away from vividly imagined monsters might find his belief system is no longer useful.

- d. Is the distinguishing feature of the two classes of perception introduced in paragraph three adequate? If not, what other distinguishing features might you add?

Ideas seem to be more under our control than impressions and it isn't clear that this is the same as what Hume means by 'force'.

- e. Do you agree with the final sentence of paragraph one?

No. An impression caused by something that you glance out of the corner of your eye just briefly seems less dim than many memories or imagined things.

Paragraph 4.

- a. In paragraph one Hume made a general claim and then qualified it with an exception. In what way does Hume do something similar in paragraph four?

He begins by suggesting that it appears that "at first sight that human thought is utterly unbounded" but at the end adds "except what implies an absolute contradiction."

- b. Summarize paragraph three in no more than 25 words.

It seems as if we can think of anything at all except logical contradictions.

Paragraph 5.

- a. Hume says that contrary to what might at first sight appear to be the case (paragraph four) our thought can only operate on materials that come from what source?

"the materials that the senses and experience provide us with" i.e. impressions.

- b. In what four ways can the mind manipulate these materials?

combine, transpose, enlarge, or shrink.

- c. What two examples does Hume use to illustrate his claim?

A golden mountain and a virtuous horse.

- d. In what way are the two examples here similar to the examples given earlier in paragraphs one and two?

One seems external and the other seems internal.

Think for yourself

- a. It is usual to say that Hume is making a distinction between simple ideas and complex ideas. Give your own example of a simple idea and your own examples to illustrate the four ways in which thought is said to operate on simple ideas.

Remembering the colour orange; Pegasus; a ghost holding their head under their arm; Land of the giants; Lilliput.

Paragraph 6.

- a. Hume begins this paragraph by saying that he is going to give two arguments to prove something. What is he attempting to prove?

"all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones."

- b. Why might Hume's first argument be described as an inductive argument?

An inductive argument often generalizes from individual cases and Hume is claiming that all ideas are based on impressions on the basis that all such cases so far investigated have this characteristic.

- c. How does Hume use the example of God to illustrate his point?

The idea of God comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds.

- d. Does the example of God illustrate his point with regard to simple or complex ideas?

Complex.

- e. What does Hume say would show that he is wrong?

An idea that isn't derived from an impression.

Paragraph 7.

- a. Do the examples in this paragraph illustrate his point with regard to simple or complex ideas?

Simple ideas.

- b. The argument in this paragraph is made in a number of ways. If it was divided according to the following schema what would each point represent?

1a, 1b, 2a, 2b, 3

1a, Someone who can't have some kind of sensation because there is something wrong with his eyes/ears, etc.

1b, Someone who has never experienced an object that will give a certain kind of sensation e.g. wine.

2a, A gentle person can't form any idea of determined revenge or cruelty.

2b, A selfish person cannot easily conceive the heights of friendship and generosity.

3 Non-human beings have senses of which we can have no conception.

- c. State one way in which 1a and 1b are similar and one way in which they are different.

They both involve lack of experience (no impression) but one is due to inability and the other due to lack of opportunity.

Think for yourself

- a. What problems may arise with Hume's claim in point 3 above?

It is difficult to know what is going on in anyone else's mind let alone an animal's mind. We might infer they have senses of which we have no conception by looking at their behaviour but it may turn out that their senses are just like ours and vary only in a matter of degree. If so, by Hume's own argument concerning complex ideas, we would be able to have similar ideas to them.

- b. Do you regard each of the points made in paragraph six equally convincing? If not, why not?

No. His point regarding wine is perhaps ill-chosen not only because it seems factually incorrect but because the flavour of wine might be constructed as a complex idea. Hume himself wonders if the example of absent feelings has ever actually happened.

Paragraph 8

- a. Why is the example given in this paragraph often referred to as a 'problem'?

It appears to be a straightforward case of something that two paragraphs before he said would prove him wrong. Hume presumably realises this but still includes the example. This is difficult to explain.

- b. When Hume says that there is 'one counter example' what reasons can be given for thinking this is referring to a type of situation rather than one specific situation?

He says "or those of sound". Later he says "except for one particular shade of blue (for instance)". The words "for instance" clearly suggest that this is an example of a larger class of problems.

- c. What is the purpose of his argument concerning red and green?

To demonstrate that immediate neighbours in a sequence of colours must be different from one another.

- d. Why is this kind of argument, i.e. the one about red and green, called a *reductio ad absurdum*?

In this kind of argument you start by assuming the opposite of what you want to establish and show that this assumption leads to an absurdity. In this case assuming that neighbouring shades are identical leads to the absurd conclusion that red and green are identical and so, therefore, the neighbouring shades cannot be identical.

- e. It would be wrong to say that Hume has given an example of a simple idea that isn't based on an impression. Hume doesn't claim to have done this. Being precise, what has Hume claimed?

"It is not absolutely impossible for an idea to occur without a corresponding impression." Hume is not presenting this as an exception to empiricism but as an exception to the copy principle. Hume does not go on to explain in what way this idea emerges.

Think for yourself

- a. If the series of blue shades had 'each member of the series shading imperceptibly into its neighbour' as in the red/green argument, does it follow that removing one of the shades means that someone would notice a gap in the sequence?

No. If the adjoining members of the sequence really did shade imperceptibly into the next the difference might be so slight that when one is removed the remaining members that now adjoin may still shade imperceptibly into one another.

- b. If the series was set up so that each member of the series did *not* shade imperceptibly into its neighbour so that a person with normal experience of colours could see that they were clearly distinct shades, is it obvious that someone with abnormal experience of colours would 'notice a blank in the place where the missing shade should go'?

Intuitively it seems to most people that this would be the case but it might well depend on how big the jumps were from one shade to the next. Presumably a suitable test might be devised to find out.

- c. It seems obvious that the problem might be removed by saying that somebody might augment or diminish the shades on either side of the missing shade and so generate the required idea. Why does this 'solution' not get rid of the 'problem'.

If this solution is so 'obvious' then it is difficult to decide why Hume didn't use this 'solution' and why he bothers mentioning it at all. Clearly Hume wants colours to be simple ideas and does regard this as an exception. He doesn't seem bothered by it though.

- d. It has been suggested that the four operations of the mind listed in paragraph four might be need to be added to with another operation, e.g. mental mixing. Why does this 'solution' not get rid of the 'problem'.

Whether this 'solution' works or not doesn't affect the fact that Hume regarded it as an exception but doesn't regard it as the counter-example he suggests just two paragraphs before would refute his theory

- d. Whether he is right to or not, Hume does regard this as a counter-example to his earlier claim. However, this clearly does not trouble him. How might an analysis of what he said in paragraph one and in paragraph four help to explain this?

Perhaps this is another case of Hume not really being concerned with absolutely all cases but, rather, with what is true. He does earlier claim that his theory is universally true but perhaps he is still focussing on all normal circumstances and he regards this class of exceptions as somehow different.

Paragraph 9.

- a. How does Hume plan to use his theory of ideas to settle certain philosophical problems?

Hume wants to get rid of "all that nonsensical jargon that has so long dominated metaphysical reasonings" Ideas are often faint, confused and incorrectly assumed to exist because of the way words are used; Impressions are strong and vivid, clearly distinguished from one another and harder to make mistakes about. If it turns out that a supposed idea has no corresponding impression then that 'idea' can be dismissed as a pseudo-idea and the associated term dismissed as meaningless.