Hume on Impressions, Ideas and Abstraction

David Hume’s *Treatise on Human Nature* opens with an inquiry into the workings of the mind. This inquiry suggests that we should view all our perceptions as divisible into two classes, the class of impressions and the class of ideas. The distinction between these two classes is made in terms of a difference of degrees of force with which they strike the mind. The perceptions which have the greatest degree of force or violence are what Hume terms impressions and he includes under the heading of “impression” sensations, passions and emotions. By contrast, *ideas* are fainter in their effect on the mind than impressions and are described as “faint images” of the impressions, the kind of images we have to deal with in thinking. The division between impressions and ideas appears initially very sharp and Hume suggests that the two classes are in general very different to each other. However, as we shall see, this claim is not so obvious as Hume suggests. Firstly, there are instances where the two classes shade into each other, instances that Hume terms the “violent emotions” of the mind where ideas approach impressions. In these cases, as for instance with dreams, what are in fact ideas appear to us as if they are impressions. Secondly, whilst the difference has been explained in terms of force, there can be impressions which make little impact upon us. We will further see in a moment that Hume also allows for two different kinds of impression.

Prior to looking at this further point about impressions Hume first introduces a distinction between simple and complex perceptions, a
distinction that applies to both impressions and ideas. Simple perceptions, whether of impressions or ideas, are such as to allow of no separation so that they possess no parts. Complex perceptions, by contrast, do have parts which are distinguishable from each other. This difference between simple and complex is complimented by a second one which Hume introduces as a modification of the next claim he makes concerning the relationship between impressions and ideas. This next claim concerning the relationship between impressions and ideas is to the effect that there is a *resemblance* between them. So Hume indicates that ideas of things correspond to the impressions of them.

However the modification that Hume introduces of this point is to the effect that the division between simple and complex perceptions limits the scope of the resemblance relation indicated. It does this in the sense that complex ideas are not reflections of given particular impressions and, similarly, complex impressions are never exactly copied in ideas. With complex ideas we can combine together elements that never correspond to anything given to our senses but similarly with complex impressions no idea can give the numerous elements of the impression (in the first case think of the idea of Atlantis, in the second the impression of Paris). Given this point it would appear that Hume’s resemblance thesis holds not between complex ideas and complex impressions but only between simple ideas and simple impressions. With simple ideas and simple impressions there is only, states Hume, a difference of degree, not one of nature.
So if simple ideas correspond to simple impressions and simple impressions correspond to simple ideas then there is a degree of influence between these two. The influence in question is taken by Hume to be one in which the first priority goes to the impressions. The basis of this claim concerns the manner in which things are presented to us in our process of maturation Hume suggests. So, for example, to get an idea of a colour, the first step that it is natural to take is to present someone with something of that colour and hence give them the impression of it. This genetic suggestion is part of a causal story Hume tells since he indicates that ideas do not produce impressions or at least that having a certain idea will not, in the absence of any impressions, produce an impression. On the other hand, having an impression will give rise to an idea. Again Hume complicates this point slightly by raising a possible objection to this as a general point when he considers that if we have seen all the shades of the colour blue save one then we would be able, by reasoning alone, to fill the missing shade in for ourselves. This example is one that Hume immediately dismisses as too singular to affect the general point though his real argument here should really be that the filling in here of the shade is only possible given the background accumulation of impressions so that even in this case the idea would be dependent upon the impressions.

The next major point that Hume makes is to divide impressions into two sub-classes. There are not merely impressions of sensation, despite the suggestion to the contrary of the argument up to this point. There are also impressions of reflection. Whilst the impressions of sensation are original
elements of the mind, the impressions of reflection are in fact derived from our ideas. The argument for this view presents a second type of causal story. In this story the mind first has a sensory in-put and then takes a “copy” of this in-put. After the impression has ceased to operate upon the mind this “copy” remains and is what we later call the “idea”. Noticeably the impression of sense produces the idea. Should the idea be one of pleasure or pain then it will in its turn produce new impressions such as aversion, hope and fear where these latter are impressions of reflection. The impression of reflection would appear then to be a kind of learned behaviour of the mind in response to the “copies” of the impressions of sensation. This story is complicated further when we note that the impressions of reflection can themselves be further copied by memory and imagination which gives rise to ideas that, in their turn, can be the basis of further impressions of reflection. The general claim though is that impressions of reflection, unlike impressions of sensation, are based upon ideas. Hume also understands the impressions of reflection, despite his opening discussion of impressions of sensation, as being more appropriately investigated by philosophers. For this reason the rest of his discussion turns out to be an enquiry into ideas in order to see how they give rise to impressions of reflection.

The next step is to claim that when an idea retains some degree of the vivacity it first had given to it by the impression of sensation then we understand it as having a place in our memory. By contrast, when an idea becomes a perfect example of its type and loses this link of vivacity to the impression of sensation then we say that the idea has become part of our
imagination. Memory follows the pattern of the original impressions that gave rise to its continuing force whereas imagination is the creative element of mind in the sense that, in the absence of this continuing force, it is free to order and re-order the data it deals with. This does not mean that there are no principles governing the operation of imagination as were that true then we would never really be able to form coherent and consistent ideas. So there must be something that is the basis of this ability and Hume terms this *association*. This association is the means by which the mind moves between ideas and also the basis of any given idea being held in place in a coherent way.

There are three principles whose operation, for Hume, brings association about: resemblance, contiguity in time or place and cause and effect. Resemblance in itself indicates a form of association whilst contiguity is a means by which impressions create a bond for imagination even after the force of the impressions has entirely ceased. However, the relation of cause and effect is the one that Hume deems the most extensive one in the operations of the mind. From these principles of association arise also complex ideas, particularly the complex ideas of relation, modes and substances but we will leave the enquiry into these aside as I will now turn instead to Hume’s account of abstraction.

When Hume turns to discussing abstraction he refers to Berkeley’s view of the matter and describes Berkeley’s claim that all general ideas are nothing but particular ones that have been connected to a name that gives them more extensive significations as “one of the greatest and most valuable
discoveries that has been made”. So Hume intends to confirm Berkeley’s view of abstraction and he does so by enquiring first of all into what Berkeley described as the “most abstract” ideas, taking the example of the idea of a man which does not represent anyone of any given size or as possessed of any particular quality. In reply to this conception Hume denies that we can form such an idea of something without any real sense of degree of quantity or quality. In making this point Hume appeals to the general claim that whenever some things are different they are distinguishable and that what is distinguishable is separable by thought or imagination. So to test whether abstraction involves separation we need to consider it in light of this point. When he does so Hume denies that the length of a line can be distinguished from the line itself as the two ideas admit of no separation so that even a “general idea” of a line would have to appear before the mind as possessed of a precise degree of quantity and quality.

To support this initial claim Hume argues that no object can appear before the senses without being possessed of certain degrees of quantity and quality. Since ideas are derived from such impressions of sense and copy them then if the latter can never possess such absence of degree of quantity and quality then neither can the former. What follows from these points is that abstract ideas must be in themselves individual even though they become general in representation. The means by which this “becoming general” occurs is explained by Hume in terms of a resemblance relation being given a common name so that what is thus named becomes considered as if it were an existent of a different sort to what it took its
name from. By this means the numerous occasions of resemblance are left only in potential for the mind and a “partial consideration” is adopted instead. As Hume summarises his account: “A particular idea becomes general by being annex’d to a general term; that is, to a term, which from a customary conjunction has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination.” (22)

Ideas are particular in their nature and there is only a finite number of them but custom enables them to become general in their representation and in becoming so general the ideas become capable of containing an infinite number of other ideas under their heading. To complete this account of abstraction Hume has to discuss the notion of the distinction of reason. A distinction of reason is a means by which thought can dissolve the complex elements of things such that parts become separated from each other. Given that Hume has claimed that there is no separable relation between the line and its quantity it would appear a problem for him how such a distinction of reason is possible. However he gives an ingenious account of it. The example he uses begins by considering a globe of white marble. Presented with this the whiteness of the globe is not, for our impression, separate from the globe itself. However if we then present, next to this globe another one of comparable dimensions but of a different colour we then find we can compare two separate resemblances, one in terms of the shape and dimension and one in terms of colour. By this means we begin to form the “distinction of reason” but this distinction is a kind of abbreviated way we
represent to ourselves something. Hume explains this in the following citation:

“When we wou’d consider only the figure of the globe of white marble, we form in reality an idea both of the figure and colour, but tacitly carry our eye to its resemblance with the globe of black marble: And in the same manner, when we wou’d consider its colour only, we turn our view to its resemblance with the cube of white marble. By this means we accompany our ideas with a kind of reflexion, of which custom renders us, in a great measure, insensible.”

So the distinction of reason is grounded on a comparison that is not consistently borne in mind given that the custom renders it almost unconscious for us but it cannot fail to be in some way present.