Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding

David Hume

Section 2: The origin of ideas

Everyone will freely admit that the perceptions of the mind when a man •feels the pain of excessive heat or the pleasure of moderate warmth are considerably unlike what he feels when he later •remembers this sensation or earlier •looks forward to it in his imagination. Memory and imagination may mimic or copy the perceptions of the senses, but they can't create a perception that has as much force and liveliness as the one they are copying. Even when they operate with greatest vigour, the most we will say is that they represent their object so vividly that we could *almost* say we feel or see it. Except when the mind is out of order because of disease or madness, memory and imagination can never be so lively as to create perceptions that are indistinguishable from the ones we have in seeing or feeling. The most lively thought is still dimmer than the dullest sensation.

A similar distinction runs through all the other perceptions of the mind. A real fit of •anger is very different from merely thinking of that emotion. If you tell me that someone is in •love, I understand your meaning and form a correct conception of the state he is in; but I would never mistake that conception for the turmoil of actually being in love! When we think back on our past sensations and feelings, our thought is a faithful mirror that copies its objects truly; but it does so in colours that are fainter and more washed-out than those in which our original perceptions were clothed. To tell one from the other you don't need careful thought or philosophical ability.

So we can divide the mind's perceptions into two classes, on the basis of their different degrees of force and liveliness. The less forcible and lively are commonly called 'thoughts' or 'ideas'. The others have no name in our language or in most others, presumably because we don't need a general label for them except when we are doing philosophy. Let us, then, take the liberty of calling them 'impressions', using that word in a slightly unusual sense. By the term 'impression', then, I mean *all our more lively perceptions when we hear or see or feel or love or hate or desire or will*. These are to be distinguished from ideas, which are *the fainter perceptions of which we are conscious when we reflect on* [= 'look inwards at'] our impressions.

It may seem at first sight that human thought is utterly unbounded: it not only escapes all human power and authority ·as when a poor man thinks of becoming wealthy overnight, or when an ordinary citizen thinks of being a king·, but isn't even confined within the limits of nature and reality. It is as easy for the imagination to form monsters and to join incongruous shapes and appearances as it is to conceive the most natural and familiar objects. And while •the body must creep laboriously over the surface of one planet, •thought can instantly transport us to the most distant regions of the universe—and even further. What never was seen or heard of may still be conceived; nothing is beyond the power of thought except what implies an absolute contradiction.

But although our thought seems to be so free, when we look more carefully we'll find that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts merely to the ability to combine, transpose, enlarge, or shrink the materials that the senses and experience provide us with. When we think of a golden mountain, we only join two consistent ideas—*gold* and *mountain*—with which we were already familiar. We can conceive a virtuous horse because our own feelings enable us to conceive virtue, and we can join this with the shape of a horse, which is an animal we know. In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward senses or

from our inward feelings: all that the mind and will do is to mix and combine these materials. Put in philosophical terminology:

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

Here are two arguments that I hope will suffice to prove this.

(1) When we analyse our thoughts or ideas—however complex or elevated they are—we always find them to be made up of simple ideas that were copied from earlier feelings or sensations. Even ideas that at first glance seem to be the furthest removed from that origin are found on closer examination to be derived from it. The idea of God—meaning an infinitely intelligent, wise, and good Being—comes from extending beyond all limits the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we find in our own minds. However far we push this enquiry, we shall find that every idea that we examine is copied from a similar impression. Those who maintain that this isn't universally true and that there are exceptions to it have only one way of refuting it—but it should be easy for them, if they are right. They need merely to produce an idea that they think *isn't* derived from this source. It will then be up to me, if I am to maintain my doctrine, to point to the impression or lively perception that corresponds to the idea they have produced.

(2) If a man can't have some kind of sensation because there is something wrong with his eyes, ears etc., he will never be found to have corresponding ideas. A blind man can't form a notion of colours, or a deaf man a notion of sounds. If either is cured of his deafness or blindness, so that the sensations can get through to him, the ideas can then get through as well; and then he will find it easy to conceive these objects. The same is true for someone who has never experienced an object that will give a certain kind of sensation: a Laplander or Negro has no notion of the taste of wine ·because he has never had the sensation of tasting wine·. Similarly with inward feelings. It seldom if ever happens that a person has *never* felt or is *wholly* incapable of some human feeling or emotion, but the phenomenon I am describing does occur with feelings as well, though in lesser degree. A gentle person

can't form any idea of determined revenge or cruelty; nor can a selfish one easily conceive the heights of friendship and generosity. Everyone agrees that non-human beings may have many senses of which we can have no conception, because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only way in which an idea can get into the mind, namely through actual feeling and sensation.

(There is, however, one counter-example that may prove that it isn't absolutely impossible for an idea to occur without a corresponding impression. I think it will be granted that the various distinct ideas of colour that enter the mind through the eye (or those of sound, which come in through the ear) really are different from each other, though they resemble one another in certain respects. If that holds for different colours, it must hold equally for the different shades of a single colour; so each shade produces a distinct idea, independent of the rest. (We can create a continuous gradation of shades, running from red at one end to green at the other, with each member of the series shading imperceptibly into its neighbour. If the immediate neighbours in the sequence are not different from one another, then red is not different from green, which is absurd.) Now, suppose that a sighted person has become perfectly familiar with colours of all kinds, except for one particular shade of blue (for instance), which he happens never to have met with. Let all the other shades of blue be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest: it is obvious that he will notice a blank in the place where the missing shade should go. That is, he will be aware that there is a greater quality-distance between that pair of neighbouring shades than between any other neighbour-pair in the series. Can he fill the blank from his own imagination, calling up in his mind the idea of that particular shade, even though it has never been conveyed to him by his senses? Most people, I think, will agree that he can. This seems to show that simple ideas are not always, in every instance, derived from corresponding impressions. Still, the example is so singular [Hume's word] that it's hardly worth noticing, and on its own it isn't a good enough reason for us to alter our general maxim.)

So here is a proposition that not only seems to be simple and intelligible in itself, but could if properly used make every dispute equally intelligible by banishing all that nonsensical jargon that has so long dominated metaphysical reasonings.

All ideas, especially abstract ones, are naturally faint and obscure, so that the mind has only a weak hold on them. Ideas are apt to be mixed up with other ideas that resemble them. We tend to assume that a given word is associated with a determinate idea just because we have used it so often, even if in using it we haven't had any distinct meaning for it. In contrast with this, all our impressions—i.e. all our outward or inward sensations—are strong and vivid. The boundaries between them are more exactly placed, and it is harder to make mistakes about them. So when we come to suspect that a philosophical term is being used without any meaning or idea (as happens all too often), we need only to ask: From what impression is that supposed idea derived? If none can be pointed out, that will confirm our suspicion ·that the term is meaningless, i.e. has no associated idea·. By bringing ideas into this clear light we may reasonably hope to settle any disputes that arise about whether they exist and what they are like.