

Hume on Ideas, Impressions, and Knowledge

Let me try one more time to make clear the ideas we discussed today in class.

Ideas and Impressions

First off, Hume, like Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley, believes that what we are immediately aware of in conscious experiences are (only) mental contents, i.e., “stuff” that exists “in our minds,” and not material substances that may exist outside our minds and may be the ultimate causes of these mental contents. While Descartes, Locke, and Berkeley called these mental contents by many names, including, “ideas,” “thoughts,” and “sensations,” Hume’s general term for all such mental contents is “perceptions.” So, in spite of the difference in terminology, Hume agrees with the other three on this point: that we are directly aware only of things that exist only in our minds.

Hume uses the general term “perceptions” for all of these because he wants to point out a distinction between them that, he thinks, the others have not paid close enough attention to. Hume notes that some of our perceptions are very clear and lively, and he associates them with what we are aware of in sensations, emotions, and feelings. These he calls “impressions.” In addition to impressions, he claims that the rest of our perceptions are similar to impressions, but less lively and clear. These he calls “ideas.” He gives an example of perception vs. memory. In perception, I have an impression of something (i.e., it is an impression I am immediately aware of), but when I later remember that same thing, I have an idea (i.e., it is an idea I am immediately aware of). My idea of the object is much like my impression,

but less vivid and detailed. He also notes that this distinction (between impressions and ideas) should be very familiar to us in that we are all familiar with the distinction between feeling and thinking. So what he is saying that in sensation (emotions and feelings), what I am immediately aware of is an *impression*—a vivid and clear perception, and that what I am aware of in thinking are *ideas*—less vivid and clear “copies” of impressions.

The point Hume is making here is one that (I claimed) was implicit in Berkeley’s rejection of abstract ideas. Berkeley said that we could not, for example, form an idea of color in general, and his evidence was that we could not form an image in our minds of something that had no particular color. My explanation was that Berkeley was assuming that all our mental contents were “sensuous” in nature, i.e., that they were either sensations, or “xerox” copies of sensations. That is exactly what Hume is claiming here. After all, he says that *all* perceptions are either impression or ideas (which are copies of impressions). And Hume’s reason for pointing this out is likewise similar to Berkeley’s. Hume, like Berkeley, will reject “abstract ideas.” Like Berkeley, Hume thinks that philosophers often talk a lot of nonsense. If our words are to have meaning, they must stem from our ideas. But all of our ideas must have some (quasi-) sense content. So, if there is no possible sense experience regarding something we are claiming to talk about, then there are no ideas behind our words, and we are really just talking nonsense.

Hume claims not only that all of our ideas are “like” impressions, but that they depend on them. That is, we can have an idea only if we have had the (simple) impression that it is copied from. This is just his way of making the same point that Locke made by saying that at birth our minds are like a “blank slate” with nothing “on” them, and that we get ideas (Hume would

say perceptions) in our minds only by way of the senses. Hume is simply being a bit more careful. Not all of the perceptions in mind come *directly* from sense experience, but they are all composed of simpler parts that are, at the very least, “*copies*” of what we received through sense experience.

So, Hume’s claim here should not be viewed as controversial by either Locke or Berkeley—it is just Hume’s basis for empiricism (the claim that all knowledge stems from sense experience). Whatever knowledge is, exactly, it is justified in terms of what is in our minds. And what is in our minds, Hume says, are always either impressions received through the senses, or ideas, i.e., less vivid and clear “copies” of these impressions that we become aware of in thinking as opposed to in sensing.

Relations of Ideas and Matters of Fact

It occurred to me in class today that after an hour’s discussion of the distinction between ideas and impressions, it might be natural to think that when Hume talks about relation of *ideas*, he is talking about something that is true only of ideas, and not also about impressions. I don’t think that this is so. To be clearer, Hume might have talked about relations between *perceptions* instead of between ideas.

In order to understand what Hume says in this section, it is important to note that he is now talking about a different issue than he was before. The distinction between ideas and impressions is a distinction between the different kinds of perceptions (i.e., mental contents) that we are directly aware of. In this section, Hume is talking about knowledge, and, specifically, the different ways in which we can *justify* that some belief we have really constitutes *knowledge*. So, in this section, he is talking about the different kinds of *statements* that we can know to be true. What he is saying

is that the way we can come to justify certain statements (statements or beliefs about the relations between our ideas) is different from the ways we can justify other statements (statements or beliefs about matters of fact.)

(Statements about) “Relations between Ideas,” Hume says, can be known with absolute certainty, and can be known by the “mere operations of thought.” (Statements about) “Matters of Fact,” he says, can never be known with the same degree of certainty, and cannot be known by the mere operations of thought. A helpful clue is that the negations of matters of fact are never contradictions. The statement “Kent Baldner is the President” is (as a matter of fact) *false*, but it is not a contraction (like “A equals not-A”). So, since this distinction (between knowledge of relation between ideas and of matters of fact) is meant to be exclusive and exhaustive (i.e., all knowledge is of one kind or the other, and never both), it follows that (true) statements about relations between ideas *are* such that their negations are contradictory. Using Leibniz’ language, we can say that (true) statements about relations between ideas are such that their predicates are “contained” within their subjects.

Consider “All bachelors are male.” The definition of “bachelor” is “unmarried male,” so we see that the predicate, “male,” is “contained” in the subject. The negation of this statement, “Some bachelor is not male” is contradictory, in that it says that some unmarried male is not male, i.e., that some male is not male. This is what it means to say that these kinds of statements are known by knowing the relation between ideas—I know that these statements are true by knowing the “relation” between the relevant ideas, i.e., by knowing that my idea of the predicate is part of my idea of the subject.

Statements about matters of fact, on the other hand, are never such that their negations are contradictory. That is, their predicates are not contained in their subjects, and so these kinds of statements cannot be known simply by examining the ideas I have of these things, but depend, instead, upon how things actually are in the world.

What Hume is doing here is putting strict limits on the kinds of things that I can know with absolute certainty and that I can know *a priori* (i.e., that I can justify without appeal to sense experience). Hume is claiming that the *only* things I can know *a priori*, and with certainty, are statements that are truly merely because of the relations between the ideas in them, specifically, statements where the predicate is contained in the subject. These statements I can know “merely by the operations of thought” because they don’t tell me what the world is like, but are true simply because some of our ideas “contain” other of our ideas. I can know that all bachelors are male simply by knowing what “bachelor” and “male” means, but this doesn’t imply any knowledge about, say, whether or not there are, as a matter of fact, any bachelor or any males in the world.

But it is only regarding relations between ideas that I can have this kind of certainty and that I can know merely by examining my own concepts. Claims about what actually does or does not exist in the world can never be known merely by thinking (can never be known *a priori*), and are never capable of the same kind of certainty. For example, it seems that I have pretty good evidence, for example, that there really are male creatures existing in the world. I have plenty of empirical evidence for this (or, at least, so it seems). But since the negation of this claim is not a contradiction (i.e., since the predicate of this claim is not contained in the subject), this is not something I can know merely by examining my ideas. It is at least

logically possible that this claim is false because its negation is not a contradiction.

So, what Hume is really claiming here amounts to a rejection of the sort of *a priori* metaphysics we saw in philosophers like Leibniz, and, to some extent Descartes. Hume is claiming that I can have *a priori* knowledge *only* of claims whose negations are contradictory. I can know these claims merely by thinking about them, and I can have complete certainty about them, but they don't tell me anything about how the world is, but only about how certain of my ideas are related to other of my ideas. Claims about how the world actually is, on the contrary, can never be known *a priori*—merely by thinking—but depend instead on something else (namely, upon sense experience). These claims can at best be known with a high degree of probability, but never with absolute certainty.

Once again, this is simply another way of asserting that all knowledge comes from (must be justified by appeal to) experience. Sure, there are some things we can know merely by thinking, but these are simply logical truths that are, in some sense, “true by definition.” They tell me nothing about how, as a matter of fact, the world really is. Claims about what really exists, about matters of fact, can never be justified simply by comparing my own ideas, but depend instead upon sense experience.

Both of these claims (about ideas vs. impressions and about knowledge of relations between ideas vs. knowledge of matters of fact) are fundamental in understanding everything else Hume will claim. That is, everything else we will read in Hume will *follow* from one or both of these

claims. These claims are also important in understanding Kant, who will claim (explicitly or implicitly) that Hume was mistaken in both cases.