Ideas and Impressions

I have just finished grading the quiz I gave on the distinction Hume makes between ideas and impressions. There was one fairly common misunderstanding that I want to address. Many students said something to the effect that impressions were caused by things outside the mind, while ideas were not (or something similar to this). This is not correct, but it is a fairly typical first attempt at understanding what Hume is saying (and what he is really up to). But I think it is important to see why this answer, though on the right track, is not accurate. So let me explain a little bit here about the nature of Hume’s distinction, and why it is important for understanding what Hume is really doing.

Hume’s Treatise opens with the claim that, “All the perceptions of the human mind fall into two distinct kinds, which I shall call ‘impressions’ and ‘ideas’. ” [Treatise, Book I, Part i, Section 1] “Perceptions,” recall, are simply “mental contents,” things “inside” the mind that we are directly aware of in conscious experience. So, the word “perception” is just Hume’s generic term for what we’ve been calling “ideas,” “sensations,” “thoughts,” “feelings,” “mental images,” etc. This is, at least thus far, just a point of terminology: Hume uses the word “perception” to refer to this whole class of things that we can be directly aware so that he can then make a distinction within that class, the distinction between (what he calls) “impressions” and “ideas.”

The difference between impressions and ideas, Hume says, is in the different “degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind and make their way into our thought or consciousness.” [ibid] Impressions, Hume continues, “enter with the most force and violence.” They are the most “lively” and “vivid.” He describes these as our “sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul.” Ideas, on the other hand, are the “faint images of the others” (i.e., the faint copies of impressions) that the mind utilizes in “thinking and reasoning.” Though we may occasionally have experiences (like in “fever” or “madness”) where it is hard to distinguish these two (that is, experiences where we have ideas that seem to be almost as forceful and lively as impressions), Hume thinks that the basic distinction should be readily apparent to everyone, as we all understand the difference between “feeling and thinking.”
So, all the perceptions of the mind--all of the things we are directly aware of in conscious experience--can be divided into two distinct and non-overlapping kinds: impressions, which are the most vivid, lively, and forceful, and ideas, which are less vivid and forceful. Impressions are associated with sensations or emotions that we “feel.” Ideas are the “faint copies” of these impressions that appear before the mind when we remember or think about these events. So, right now I am having a visual impression of the computer screen in front of me (as well as tactile impressions of my fingers striking the keys). When I reflect upon that experience (or when you read my words), I (you) have an idea of the computer screen and keyboard.

Notice, now, how Hume is describing these two kinds of perceptions: he is distinguishing them internally, that is, in terms of what it is “like” to have these different kinds of conscious states. We all know that “feeling” is a different kind of experience than “thinking.” The perception I have of the screen in front of me as I type is clear, vivid, and detailed. I “feel” the keys under my fingers. I have a visual “impression” of the screen in front of me. The perceptions I have, later, when I remember or think that same keyboard is far less vivid and clear. Even if my memory is accurate (i.e., even if I am not forgetting anything), the perception that I have then is, at best, a kind of “copy” of the perception I had when I was actually seeing the screen and feeling the keypad. Again, even if my memory is perfectly accurate, we can all tell the difference between seeing the keyboard and later remembering or thinking about it. The image I have in the first case is more vivid and clear and forceful than my later recollection of it.

The point I am making here is that the difference between impressions and ideas, as Hume is explaining it, is entirely “descriptive,” i.e., it is something that we can all recognize simply by examining our own perceptions, by examining our own mental contents. That is, the difference between impression and ideas is spelled out in terms of what it is like to have these different experiences, and not in terms of what we may believe about anything outside of our minds (i.e., something distinct from the mental contents we are directly aware) that may or may not have caused these perceptions to occur in our minds. The difference between impressions and ideas is something that is “internal” to the experiences themselves, and not in something that is or isn’t external to the mind.
Now, from a common sense standpoint, we may assume or just take for granted that these “vivid” and forceful mental contents, the ones that Hume is calling “impressions,” are more vivid and forceful precisely because they are the ones that are caused in us by objects that exist outside our minds. So we may think of impressions as the mental contents we have that are caused by things that exist outside our minds. But notice that we are now doing more then describing the experiences themselves (as, for example, being more or less vivid and clear); we are trying to explain why there are these differences. We are hypothesizing that some of our mental contents are more vivid than others because (we believe) they were caused by objects outside our minds. We are no longer merely describing differences in our experiences, but offering a theory that explains these differences.

But, for Hume, this is getting ahead of ourselves. Remember that Hume is an empiricist: he believes that all our knowledge must be justified in terms of sense experience. If our belief in an external is to be justified, it must be justified in terms of these mental contents, these “perceptions,” that we are directly aware of. Maybe, such a belief could be justified in just the way we described: that is, maybe we could be justified in inferring the existence of a world outside of our minds in order to explain why some of our perceptions are more vivid and clear than others. That is an argument we will have to consider. (You may guess by now that Hume will find flaws in this reasoning.) But it is not something we can simply take for granted. If we are to be justified in believing in objects that exist outside of our minds, we will need to justify this belief on the basis of these perceptions. And that means that we can’t simply presuppose these external objects in the descriptions we give of the mental contents that are supposed to provide evidence for such objects.

So Hume is not saying that impressions are caused by external objects. He is not (at least not yet) denying that external objects cause these impressions. He is simply calling our attention to a distinction in the sorts of mental contents we have. Some of them are more vivid and forceful. Others are less so. Whether or not this difference in the kinds of perceptions we have is evidence for the existence of objects outside our minds is yet to be discussed. But at this point we shouldn’t confuse the evidence itself (the different kinds of perceptions we have) with the conclusion we may want to draw from that evidence.