

# Handout 22: Hume's Empiricism

Philosophy 322: Modern Philosophy  
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## I IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

1. "[A]ll the perceptions of the mind" can be divided into IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS

### 2. IMPRESSIONS

- (a) "All our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will"
- (b) Paradigm cases: current sensations, current emotions

### 3. IDEAS

- (a) "The less forceful and lively"
- (b) Since the distinction is supposed to be exhaustive, we can assume that anything you're directly aware of that's not an impression is an idea

## 2 THE COPY PRINCIPLE

1. A major element of Hume's empiricism:

"[A]ll our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones".

But wait! I have an idea of a golden mountain, yet have never had an impression of one.

### 2. SIMPLE VS. COMPLEX ideas

- (a) Complex ideas (e.g., my idea of a golden mountain) are formed by "compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience".
- (b) Simple ideas are copies of the materials afforded us by the senses and experiences

### 3. The COPY PRINCIPLE:

CP. If  $S$  has an idea  $I$ , then  $I$  is either simple or complex. If  $I$  is simple,  $I$  is a copy of one of  $S$ 's impressions. If  $I$  is complex, it is composed of simple ideas.

### 3 ARGUMENTS FOR CP

#### 1. The 'Try It And See' Argument

- (a) “[W]hen we analyze our thoughts or ideas, however compounded or sublime, we always find that they resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment”.
- (b) To refute this argument, all we need is to produce a single counterexample: an idea that does not resolve itself into simple ideas copied from impressions
- (c) Faced with such an example, Hume may:
  - i. Argue the idea *is* copied from impressions
  - ii. Deny that there’s really an idea there at all

#### 2. The 'No Impression, No Idea' Argument

- (a) People with no way to acquire certain impressions lack the corresponding ideas:  
“A blind man can form no notion of colors, a deaf man of sounds [...] A man of mild manners can form no idea of inveterate revenge or cruelty, nor can a selfish heart easily conceive the heights of friendship and generosity”.
- (b) Questions for this argument:
  - i. Even if Hume is right about these examples, why think this is true of all ideas?
  - ii. Is Hume right about these examples?

### 4 THE MISSING SHADE OF BLUE

- 1. “There is, however, one contradictory phenomenon...”.
- 2. This is a case where (it seems) you have a (simple) idea but no original impression.
- 3. Humean responses:
  - (a) Say that your idea of the missing shade is a complex idea.
  - (b) Say that you don’t really have an idea of the missing shade.
  - (c) Alter CP in some way.
  - (d) Dismiss the counterexample. This is Hume’s response:  
“[T]his instance is so singular that it is scarcely worth our observing and does not merit that for it alone we should alter our general maxim”.

### 5 CP AS A CRITERION FOR MEANINGFULNESS

- 1. Hume uses CP to distinguish meaningful philosophical disputes from meaningless ones:

“Here, therefore, is a proposition [i.e., CP] which not only seems in itself simple and intelligible, but, if a proper use were made of it, might render every dispute equally intelligible and banish all that jargon, which has so long taken possession of metaphysical reasonings and drawn disgrace upon them. [...] When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but inquire *From what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it is impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.”