

The problem of *Enquiry* V.i

Custom and habit account for why we get the idea of a cause or effect when encountering its partner

but not for why we believe that the cause or effect exists

To address this problem we need to consider what belief is and how it is related to other perceptions of the mind

A survey of “perceptions”

Feelings of warmth and cold, and other perceptions of the senses, such as colour, taste, etc.

Memories of those sensations

Imagination of those sensations

Passions of anger, joy, resentment, etc.

Memories of these sensations and passions

Thoughts of these sensations and passions formed in imagination.

Vivacity

There is an obvious difference between sensations, passions, and other feelings, on the one hand, and the thoughts had in memory and imagination on the other.

But it is not a difference in the content of the perceptions.

We can remember or imagine anything we can sense or feel.

The difference has instead to do with the manner in which the thing is perceived.

Call this difference a difference in “vivacity”

The “copy principle”

Call our lively perceptions “impressions.”

Call our faint perceptions “ideas.”

Imagination can take ideas and compound them to build things we have never experienced

But all the component ideas of these compounds are copies of impressions.

We have no ideas that originate from any other source than sense experience and passion

So none that originate from pure understanding or pure reason or innate common sense

This is proven by the fact that we can’t identify any idea that is not copied from some impression or collection of impressions.

As well as by the fact that we cannot give ideas to those who have not previously had the impressions or collections of impressions of which those ideas are copies

Two consequences of the copy principle

1. To deny that there are “innate ideas” is really to deny that there are any of our less vivacious perceptions that are not copied from impressions (i.e., to *assert* that all our fainter perceptions or “ideas” are copied from our more vivacious perceptions or “impressions”)

(after all, in whatever sense we might use the term, “innate,” sensations and passions are all innate, so we can’t deny that we have that sort of innate “idea”)

2. The proper way to define a term is not by appeal to the idea it names, but by appeal to the impressions the idea was copied from.

(because ideas are faint, they can be confused with one another, resulting in ambiguous terms, or confused with nothing at all, resulting in meaningless terms)

Principles of Association

There appear to be three fundamental principles governing the sequence of ideas in imagination:

- resemblance
- contiguity
- cause and effect

Belief

Anything that is believed can be imagined.

But not anything that can be imagined can be believed.

Like the difference between impressions and ideas,
the difference between belief and imagination has
nothing to do with the content that we believe or
imagine

it is more like the difference between
impressions and ideas

If belief was simply a matter of content, rather than
vivacity, I could make myself believe anything,
because I have imaginative control over all the
content of my thoughts

But we don't have control over our beliefs.

Analogies between beliefs and impressions

We cannot control our beliefs or our impressions as we can control our thoughts

just as we cannot control our sensations

The distinction between belief and imagination is not one of content but one of manner of conception,

just as the distinction between impression and imagination is not one of content but one of manner of conception

We can further say that the difference between ideas that are believed and ideas that are merely imagined also consists in a degree of vivacity — though not as high a degree as is found in impressions.

or even in memories (which we also believe)

Indeed, the difference between stronger and weaker belief is a matter of vivacity.

What it means to say that belief has a degree of vivacity intermediate between that of impressions or memories and fictions of the imagination

Belief:

- draws attention
- inspires deliberation
- arouses passion
- influences action

Just not in so high a degree as impressions or memories.

The vivacity scale

Impressions (maximal vivacity)

Memories

Strong beliefs

Weak beliefs

Ideas (no vivacity)

Hume's explanation of why belief arises from causal inference

When we merely imagine an object, and so are led to think of its causes or effects, we get no belief about the existence of those causes or effects.

But when we experience an object, or remember it, we do get a belief.

Why?

The theory: When getting a perception leads us to form an idea in virtue of habit, the habit not only leads us to call up the customarily associated idea, but to transfer some of the vivacity from the perception to the idea.

(if the perception has no vivacity, none gets transferred; otherwise some does)

The transfer of vivacity boosts the associated idea into being a belief.

Evidence for the theory

It appears from experiments to be a general principle that all of the associative principles transmit vivacity from given perceptions to associated ideas.

Resemblance:

e.g. effect of picture of absent friend in enlivening ideas

Contiguity:

e.g. effect of proximity in enlivening ideas

Cause:

e.g. effect of religious relics in enlivening ideas

Moreover, the enlivened ideas can enhance or become beliefs

Resemblance:

e.g. effect of religious icons on belief

Contiguity:

e.g. effect of religious pilgrimages on belief

We should therefore accept that this happens in the case of causal inference as well.

A concluding reflection

Whatever is responsible for belief in unperceived existence ought to be some instinct or mechanical tendency

rather than reasoning

This is because belief in unperceived existence is too important for purposes of life to be trusted to an operation as slow and unreliable as reasoning.

The theory offered here is both instinctive

(habit is an instinct)

and mechanical

(the transmission of vivacity from impressions or memories to associated ideas across associative links is a quasi-mechanical operation)