

Monday 3rd September 2007

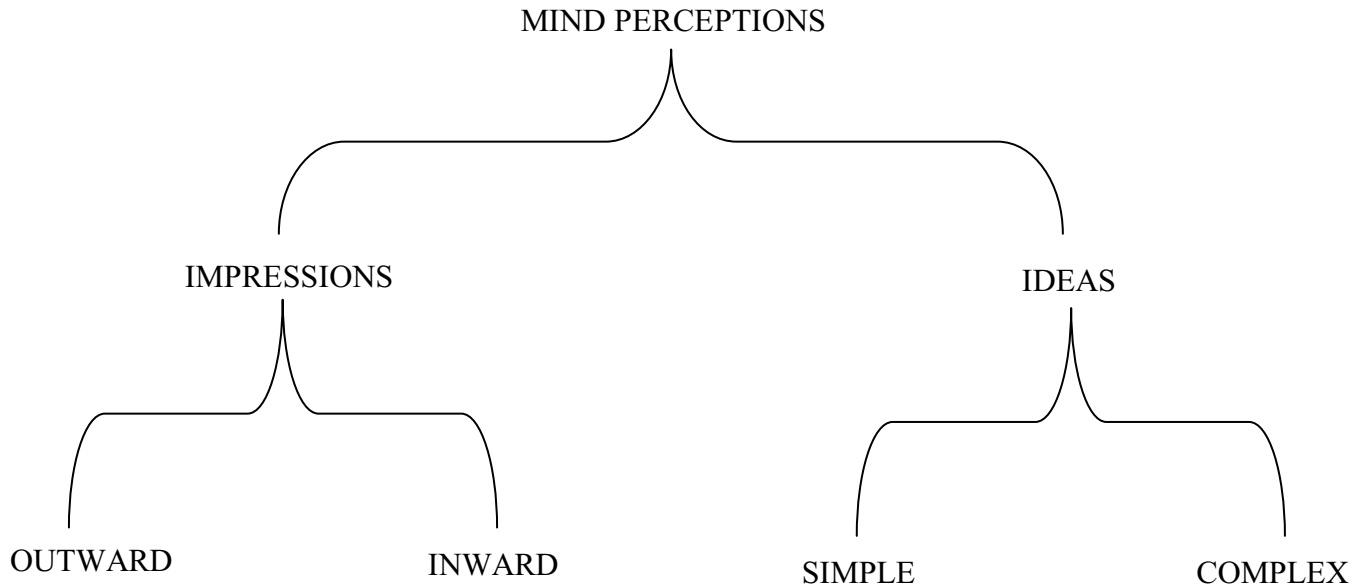
“Critically Assess The Importance of Hume’s Claim That All Our Ideas Must Originate From Preceding Impressions”

To an empiricist (such as Hume) all of our knowledge about the world is known *a posteriori*, thus it comes from experience alone, and not as a rationalist would claim, from a process of mind evaluation. This in itself raises the first of many criticisms of Hume’s work, posing the question; can you gain knowledge independently of experience? Many have argued this is the case and propose innate ideas as a valid example to counter Hume. The main purpose of Hume’s “Enquiries” was to provide a psychological rationale which distinguished between humans and animals on the basis that humans perceive certain objects and ideas.

Initially we must question what Hume means by a perception; according to the Oxford English Dictionary a perception is “a physical feeling or perception resulting from something that happens to or comes into contact with the body or a general awareness or impression not caused by anything that can be seen or defined.” Hume however we believe would have gone a stage further than this to suggest that it is any content of the mind “of which we are conscious.” This in itself raises the curious issue as to whether Hume would regard ideas which we are not presently conscious of as being a perception. Hume speaks of “perceptions of the mind” several times, while he does not offer a definition of “perception of the mind” he gives several examples including pains, pleasures, anticipations of the imagination, feeling anger, and thinking of anger. This is similar to what Locke meant when he used the term ‘ideas.’

The initial pillar which Hume begins his argument on is his infamous “fork” whereby he breaks perceptions down into the two subcategories of “impressions” and “ideas.” Impressions according to Hume are comprised of sensations (i.e. touch, smell, hear, taste, sight) and he later adds to this category emotions which are a form of reflection. Although Hume never explains why he feels it necessary to include emotions in this category, we may assume that he does so to field criticism from other philosophers. In putting emotions into this category Hume does not cause a contradiction because he uses a qualifying statement regarding the way we experience these two distinctive types of impression. Thus, Hume claims that it is possible to divide impressions again into two methods of experience; outward (to which the senses are a member) and inward (to which we attribute emotions).

On the other side to impressions are “ideas” or “thoughts,” this category encompasses memories and dreams. Yet again Hume splits this into two smaller areas of simple and complex ideas. To illustrate his point he explains that it is simple to think of the colour gold, and equally simple to think of a mountain. They are two independent ideas. However we could form complex ideas such as “golden mountains” from the sets of simple data. This would lead us to conclude that Hume was arguing all our detailed and intricate ideas are merely ‘collections’ of simple ideas. This leaves us with divisions as shown overleaf:



Hume assess' that we should be able to distinguish between the two categories based on the force and vivacity of an idea. According to Hume an impression will always be far more lively and forceful than an idea. By asking us, as his audience, to try and think of an example of a memory or dream which has been as vivid as the actual event, he immediately captures our attention, as of course it is not possible. Here I think Hume has a valid point. Irrespective of whether you agree with the way that Hume has categorized and subsequently sub-categorized, he is correct in his conclusion that never will a recollection be as powerful as the original event. Attempts to over-throw this theory include examples such as a person remembering being angry and feeling passionately angry again. However the likelihood is that the person is not just remembering but becoming angry again at the situation (whatever that may be). Hume here has unfortunately left himself open to criticism that he has not defined the terms "lively, vivacious and forceful." In my opinion these are self evident but many would argue there could be multiple meanings.

In paragraph 9 of the chapter in question Hume makes the claim that if you do not understand an idea, you must go back to the originating impression in order to clarify that which you are unsure of. This would beg the question of whether re-examining evidence is able to put more 'light' on the situation. Similarly Hume is making an assumption that there is a direct link that can be explored between the ideas and impressions. His suggestion here it emerges is that ideas are a copy of a preceding impression. Hume would struggle to take any other approach to this problem as he was an empiricist thus meaning that he could not have ideas coming from any source other than experience.

This is subsequently followed by Hume suggesting that in fact "...all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones." Again this follows with his empirical views. If this were to be true then according to Hume we could not

have any 'imagination' and this begs the question as to whether new objects would be created. For example at one stage or another somebody must have thought of the idea of a unicorn. They could not have had a corresponding impression of a unicorn as they are fictional. Hume I believe would have countered this by arguing that we experience horses and rhinos with horns, and from these we are able to form complex ideas. However for a rationalist these would come from innate ideas or a process of reasoning in the mind. Equally dreams are uncontrollable and often irrational, yet in some states of sleep (e.g. lucid dreams) the person claims it is as lively and "real" as though it was really happening.