

## **A REFLECTION ON THE NATURE AND IMPLICATIONS OF HUME'S THEORY OF IMPRESSION**

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### **Abstract**

*The central question of epistemology is that of how human beings come to know and become aware of the ideas that they possess. In a bid to answer the above question, philosophers are divided along the lines of rationalism and empiricism. While the philosophers of the rationalist persuasion will hold unto and argue for reason as the ultimate source of human knowledge, the empiricists lay claim to the supremacy of sense experience. David Hume is undoubtedly one of the greatest proponent and sustainer of the ideals of the empiricist tradition. To drive his defense of empiricism, Hume, amongst other concepts, advanced the concept of impression in his scheme. By impression, he meant any visual or auditory experience or even pain. This paper attempts a reflection on the nature and implications of Hume's theory of impression. The paper found out that as plausible as the theory of impression may seem, considering the vigor with which Hume argues for it, it is not without flaws. The paper also found out that besides distinguishing impression from ideas, Hume held that without impressions, there can be no idea. Hence, the conclusion that is reached in this paper is that, impressions and ideas make up the content of the mind in the thoughts of David Hume.*

**Keywords:** Impression, Ideas, Mind, Sense Experience.

### **Introduction**

From time immemorial, the desire to know oneself and one's environment has been one of the major task of the human person. Ihuah corroborated the above when he averred that philosophy itself originates with the concrete issues of life. Such issues raise philosophical problems when the conventional norms or standards are questioned. Such questioning normally leads to further step of the

search for knowledge and this explains why philosophy is described as justifying our actions as well as search for certainty.<sup>1</sup>

Epistemology as a term is a coinage of two Greek words *episteme* (which means knowledge) and *logos* (which means study or theory). However, there are basically two main schools of thought in the theory of knowledge. They are rationalist and empiricism. Empiricism holds that experience is the only source of knowledge. Empiricists believe that all knowledge derives from experience. David Hume is one of the greatest empiricists in the history of epistemology and metaphysics who has distinguished himself as a consistent and coherent radical empiricist. According to him, the only true knowledge is experimental, and any concept that is not available to sense perception is mere fanciful thinking.

According to Morick, Hume argued in keeping with the empiricist view that all knowledge derives from sense experience but he accepted that this has implications normally acceptable to philosophers. Locke derives all argument into demonstrative and probably. On this view, we must say that it is only probable that all men must die or the sun will rise tomorrow, because neither of these can be demonstrated. But to conform our language more to common use, we ought to divide arguments into demonstrations, proofs and probabilities by proofs meaning arguments from experience that leave no room for doubt or opposition.<sup>2</sup> One of the special terms that Hume used to drive home his programme is impression. By impression, he meant any visual or auditory experience or even pain. This paper attempts a reflection on the nature and implications of Hume's theory of impression. To do this, the present paper proceeds from a preliminary discourse on the Hume's theory of impression to a critique of the same. In the final third, it attempts a discourse on the implication of Hume's theory of impression to epistemology before the conclusion which sums up all that might have been discussed in the foregoing.

### **Hume on Impression**

At the background of Hume's thoughts are three basic influences: the first is his reaction against the metaphysical systems of such rationalist as Descartes, Spinoza, and Leibniz. The second and more positive is the influence of Isaac

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<sup>1</sup> Ihuah, A. S. "What is Philosophy?" In Ihuah, A. S. (Ed), *Philosophy and Logic for Beginners* (Makurdi; Obeta Press, 2010), Pg. 10.

<sup>2</sup> Morick, H. *Challenges of Empiricism* (Indianapolis; Hackett publishing, 1980), Pg. 21.

Newton which made Hume to attempt the adaptation of Newton's experimental method to his inquires. And the third is the influence of John Locke (the founder of the British empiricist school)- the three major aspect of this influence spans Locke's 'epistemological turn', his 'Ways of Ideas' and Locke's famous denial of innate ideas.<sup>3</sup>

David Hume articulated his doctrine of impression and Ideas, as well as how their relation in both the *Treatise on Human Nature* and the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*. Hume begins Book 1 of the *Treatise*, "Of the Understanding," by stating that "all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas".<sup>4</sup> In his later *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, he argued much the same thing, but adds an example. To quote him:

Everyone will readily allow, that there is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory the sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination.<sup>5</sup>

In neither works does he make an attempt to explain what he means by the phrase, "perceptions of the mind," but it would have been obvious to any eighteenth century reader that he is using that expression much as Descartes and Locke had used the term "idea": for anything that mind is aware of or experiences. As he put it later in the *Treatise*: "To hate, to love, to think, to feel, to see; all this is nothing but to perceive".<sup>6</sup>

Hume's initial step in the *Treatise* is to show that perceptions of the mind may be divided into "two distinct kinds," impressions and ideas. These two kinds commonly differ, according to him, "in the degrees of force and liveliness, with which they strike upon the mind." Among our impressions, those perceptions with the most "force and vivacity," are sensations (including those of pain and

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<sup>3</sup> See the Introduction of George Dicker's *Hume's Epistemology and Metaphysics* (Pg. 1-2) for a more lucid discourse on the intellectual influences that altered the Philosophical trajectory of David Hume.

<sup>4</sup> (*Treatise*1.1. 1)

<sup>5</sup> Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Ed.) Eric Steinberg, (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). (Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 1993), 2.1, 17.

<sup>6</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature: Being an Attempt to Introduce the Experimental Method of Reasoning into Moral Subjects* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.2. 67.

pleasure) and the passions and emotions. Ideas are described as 'the faint images' of impressions that are found 'in thinking and reasoning'.

The distinction between ideas and impressions is further characterized as "the difference betwixt feeling and thinking." Perceptions also differ in being either simple or complex. Simple perceptions, he stressed, "are such as admit of no distinction nor separation," a single colour or taste, for example. Complex perceptions, in contrast, are those that "may be distinguished into parts," for example, the several qualities (colour, taste, smell, etc) united together in the perception of an apple.<sup>7</sup>

Hume presented two kinds of impressions, "those of Sensation and those of Reflection." Although he has much to say about the causal origin of impressions of reflection, he intimated that impressions of sensation arise "in the soul originally, from unknown causes".<sup>8</sup> For Hume, almost nothing about the causes of sense impressions and has, strictly speaking, no theory of perception. How we come to have impressions of sensation is a problem that he leaves to "anatomists and natural philosophers".<sup>9</sup> His concern in Book 1 of the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry* is limited principally to the ideas that are derived from such impressions.

While Hume initially divides impressions into sensations, passion and emotions, ideas are characterized only as the images of impressions, and as the materials of thinking and reasoning. It is important to remember that Hume's initial discussions in *Treatise* 1.1.1.1 and in *Enquiry* 2.1 are provisional, intended, by the use of examples, to introduce the reader to the distinction he has in mind. Once roughed out, this distinction is made "with the more accuracy" as Hume proceeds with "a more accurate survey." Thus, while the official distinction between impressions and ideas is made in terms of force and liveliness or vivacity, we get an initial grip on it only as Hume gives us examples of impressions (of sensations, passions and emotions), and then tells us more about ideas, the faint images of impressions.

One might think that the characterization of ideas as faint images of impressions pre-judges Hume's important Copy Principle. Hume took great pains to argue for this principle that all simple ideas are derived from simple impressions on

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<sup>7</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.1. 1-2.

<sup>8</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.

<sup>9</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.2.1 7.

empirical grounds. He then averred that this is “the first principle I establish in the science of human nature”.<sup>10</sup> His efforts to establish it are meant to be a paradigm of empirical rigour. But if both the truth of this principle and Hume’s method of establishing it are suspect because of an apparent pre-judgment of the issue, then his new science is off to a shaky start. The Copy Principle is not merely the first and one of the most important results of Hume’s science and its method. In addition, because impressions effectively constitute or delineate our experience, the claim that all simple ideas derive from simple impressions gives substantial content to Hume’s methodological determination to stay within the bounds of experience.

As long as one remembers that Hume’s initial discussion is deliberately loose and inexact, this issue can be resolved in Hume’s favour. It is true that the term “image” suggests a relationship of dependence: an image is dependent on that of which it is an image. But all Hume needs is the weaker concept, resemblance, of which he makes explicit use in the next few pages. The official distinction between impressions and ideas is in terms of force and vivacity. The reference to ‘sensations, passions and emotions’ on the one hand, and ‘faint images of these’ on the other hand, is no part of the official theory, at this stage. These examples are introduced early on in order to help us grasp the distinction that Hume goes on to make officially, as it were, in other terms. If in the course of giving these examples to help us to understand the content he intends to give the terms “impressions” and “ideas,” he uses a stronger term than he should, no harm is done. No harm, that is, so long as, in the course of establishing the precedence of impressions over ideas, the real work is done by the notion of resemblance, not by that of image.

Thus when Hume goes on to consider “with the more accuracy” how it is that impressions and ideas interact among themselves and with each other, he shifts from talk of images to that of resemblance: “The first circumstance, that strikes my eye, is the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity.” He then mentions that one kind of perception seems to be a reflection of the other, but he does not state which kind is the original and which the reflection. He first establishes the correspondence between simple ideas and impressions: “every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a

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<sup>10</sup> See Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.1.3-4, 12; 2-3, 7.

correspondent idea." Hume "affirms" this rule on the basis of observation, and further supports it by issuing a challenge to anyone who doubts the rule: find a counter-example. He then turns to a central task in his science of human nature, that of tracing the connections, especially the causal connections, between impressions and ideas. "The full examination of this question," Hume argues "is the subject of the present treatise".<sup>11</sup>

At this early stage Hume limits himself to a precise enunciation of the Copy Principle: "we shall here content ourselves with establishing one general proposition, that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent." He establishes this principle in two stages. He first reassures himself "by a new review... that every simple impression is attended with a correspondent idea, and every simple idea with a correspondent impression." In a foreshadowing of his analysis of our idea of causation, he describes this relationship as a "constant conjunction." And he argues that this constant conjunction is evidence of a causal connection between impressions and ideas: "Such a constant conjunction, in such an infinite number of instances, can never arise from chance; but clearly proves a dependence of the impressions on the ideas or of the ideas on the impressions".<sup>12</sup>

The question of dependence, Hume argues, can be decided by determining which of a pair of resembling impressions and ideas appears first. He finds by constant experience that simple impressions are always experienced before their corresponding ideas. He also finds that our practice confirms this: when we want to introduce a person to the idea of orange, we convey to her the impression "but proceed not so absurdly, as to endeavour to produce the impressions by exciting the ideas." He summarizes his argument by stressing that the "constant conjunction of our resembling perceptions, is a convincing proof, that the one are the causes of the other; and this priority of the impressions is an equal proof, that our impressions are the causes of our ideas, not our ideas of our impressions." He also provides a second causal argument, pointing out that whenever by any accident the faculties, which give rise to any impressions, are obstructed in their operations, as when one is born blind or deaf; not only the impressions are lost, but also their correspondent ideas; so that there never appear in the mind the

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<sup>11</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.1.3, 5, 7, 2-4.

<sup>12</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 1.1.1.7-8, 4-5.

least traces of either of them. Nor is this only true, where the organs of sensation are entirely destroyed, but likewise where they have never been put in action to produce a particular impression. We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pine-apple, without having actually tasted it.<sup>13</sup>

This first principle of the science of human nature is important for many reasons. Perhaps most important is Hume's determination to use the principle as a way of testing the content of ideas and thus limiting metaphysical speculation. If ideas of sensation are copies of impressions, then the content of such an idea cannot outstrip the content of the impression from which it is derived. In the *Enquiry* this test is explicitly put forward as a check on the meaning of philosophical terms:

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 enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion.<sup>14</sup>

In *Treatise* 1.1.2, Hume distinguishes between impressions of sensation and impressions of reflection. Impressions of reflection are derived in a great measure from our ideas. On this account, we first experience impressions of sensation, including heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain. Copies of these impressions are retained as ideas, and when we recall such an idea of pleasure or pain it produces the new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear. These Hume calls "impressions of reflection" because they are derived from a reflection on previous experience. Among impressions of reflection he initially includes the "passions, desires, and emotions," but this division is apparently provisional, for in Book 2 he describes desire and aversion as direct passions, not as impressions of reflection. Moreover, Hume often uses "emotion" to refer, not to an impression of reflection, but to the feeling such an impression has. He also sometimes uses "sensation" in the same way, as when he intimated of calm passions that they "produce little emotion in the mind, and are more known by their effects than by any immediate feeling or sensation".<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, T 1.1.1.8-9, SBN 5.

<sup>14</sup> Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Ed.) Eric Steinberg, Pg.646-7.

<sup>15</sup> Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Ed.) Eric Steinberg, Pg. 417.

At *Treatise* 2.1.1, Hume replaces the distinction between impressions of sensation and reflection with a more accurate distinction between original and secondary impressions. As a term of classification, “impressions of sensation” is either too narrow or too broad. If sensation’ means comes from the senses, then it is not clear that “impressions of sensation” include pleasures and pains. But if “sensation” just means “feeling,” then there is no clear difference between impressions of sensation and those of reflection. Furthermore, the category “impressions of reflection” is misleading. Not all passions, emotions and desires are caused by reflection, by, that is, the consideration of our ideas. Some are caused immediately by other impressions. Original impressions, he intimated, are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul. They include all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures.

When Hume argues that these original impressions make their appearance in the soul without any introduction, he does not mean ‘without cause’, but rather ‘without any preceding thought or perception’. Every impression has a causal history, but the causal history of original impressions does not, typically, involve other perceptions of the mind. Moreover, Hume here reiterates the policy established at the beginning of Book 1. He will not look for the natural and physical causes of original impressions. For Hume, to do so would lead him away from his “subject, into the sciences of anatomy and natural philosophy”.<sup>16</sup>

For the remainder of the *Treatise*, Hume treats the passions as secondary impressions. Secondary impressions are caused by original impressions or by an idea derived from an original impression. The original impressions are usually pleasures or pains. Consider, for example, the bodily pain associated with an attack of gout. This produces a long train of passions, such as grief, hope, fear. These passions may also be produced, not by any present pain from this condition, but by remembering the pain it caused in the past or anticipating its future pain. As Hume stressed, “bodily pains and pleasures are the sources of many passions, both when felt and when considered by the mind”.<sup>17</sup>

Hume also distinguishes between direct and indirect passions. Among the former he lists desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, security, and, interestingly, volition.<sup>18</sup> These direct passions arise immediately from an

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<sup>16</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 275-6.

<sup>17</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 276.

<sup>18</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, 277.



impression or idea of pain or pleasure, or what Hume often calls “good or evil.” Furthermore, the “mind by an original instinct tends to unite itself with the good, and to avoid the evil, though they be conceived merely in idea, and be considered as to exist in any future period of time.” By “original instinct,” Hume means a basic feature of human nature, a feature that explains behaviour, but that cannot itself be explained. These fundamental connections between pleasure and desire or pain and aversion help explain human motivation. As Hume puts it, “the will exerts itself, when either the good or the absence of the evil may be attained by any action of the mind or body”.<sup>19</sup>

In sum, impressions for Hume are the immediate data of experience such as sensations. They are the original perceptions that come to us when we hear, see, love, hate, desire, will etc. Impressions, for Hume, include sensations of pleasure, pain, awareness of qualities and relations. The immediate, non inferential, non interpretative sense datum presented to consciousness, or which appears in consciousness are also impressions. Direct, irreducible and primitive experiences are equally aspects of impression for Hume. Ideas on the other hand are, for Hume, those less intense and vivid images or copies of sense impressions retained in memory. Faintly remembered images of impressions formerly experienced are ideas, according to Hume. Ideas also include vague copies of impressions that linger as content or residue in our memory and imagination. For Hume, ideas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other. Impressions being original are more vivid than ideas and impressions always precede ideas. To every idea, there is a corresponding impression, and without impressions there can be no ideas. Every idea, even the idea of God must be subjected to the test of from what impression is.

It is reaction to the above that Ochulor averred that “Hume also subjected the ideas of substance, the self and God to his principle of empiricism, to his empirical criterion and emerged with a total denial of the existence of all substantial reality whether material or spiritual”.<sup>20</sup> He further stressed that “substance cannot be derived from our impressions of sensation. We have no idea of the self. The universe is an empirical fact, but we cannot deduce from it the existence of God. Hume, it is evident, could not deny the existence of

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<sup>19</sup> Hume, D. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Ed.) Eric Steinberg, Pg. 438-39.

<sup>20</sup> Ochulor, Chinenye *et al* “The Necessity of Metaphysics” in *American Journal of Social Issues and Humanities*, Pg. 94.

substance and God, and then keep metaphysics. He also denied metaphysics and even ordered that all metaphysical books be committed to the flame".<sup>21</sup>

### **A Critique of Hume's Theory of Impression**

Hume's theory of impression represents the bankruptcy of eighteenth-century reasonableness. He starts out, like Locke, with the intention of being sensible and empirical, taking nothing on trust, but seeking whatever instruction is to be obtained from experience and observation. But having a better intellect than Locke's, a greater acuteness in analysis, and a smaller capacity for accepting comfortable inconsistencies, he arrives at the conclusion that apart from experience and observation nothing is to be learnt. There is no such thing as a rational belief. "If we believe that fire warms, or water refreshes, it is only because it costs us too much pains to think otherwise".<sup>22</sup> We cannot help believing, but no belief can be grounded in reason.

There are many reasons why Hume's theory of impression is worth its name. In other words, the confession of Immanuel Kant in his proclamation, that, 'Hume has woken him up, from his dogmatic slumber', is an attestation, to the fact that Hume's theory of impression has merits. Kant in his work *The Critique of Pure Reason* argued that, we are confronted with a plurality of various sense impressions, that he calls the "manifolds of experience".<sup>23</sup> He agrees with Hume that by themselves these sensations would be discrete and unconnected. Yet our experience is not a humble-jumble of impressions, but is unified. What then is the source of this unity? The impressions themselves do not contain their own unity, nor is the unity one further item in experience. Hence, it is clear to Kant that the unity results from the synthesizing activity of the mind.<sup>24</sup>

Even Hume himself notices the difficulty of his thought concerning the necessary connection and correspondence of impression and ideas. He puts it thus:

It is certain, that the mind, in its perceptions, must begin somewhere; and that since the impressions precede their correspondent ideas, there must be some impressions, which without any introduction make their appearance in the soul. As

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<sup>21</sup> Ochulor, Chinenye *et al* "The Necessity of Metaphysics", Pg. 94.

<sup>22</sup> Stroud, B. *Hume*. (New York: Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2003), Pg. 23.

<sup>23</sup> Scruton, R. *The Short History of Western Philosophy: from Descartes to Wittgenstein*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition) (New York: Routledge, 1995) 54

<sup>24</sup> McInerney, R. *A History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Clarendon Press, 1945), Pg. 91.

these depend upon natural and physical causes, the examination of them would lead me too far from my present subject, into the sciences of anatomy and natural philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, in the *Treatise*, Hume tells us clearly why he has left to others the task of explaining the origins of impressions of sensation. Hume argued that as to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'it will always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produced by the creative power of the mind, or are derived from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they are true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses.'<sup>26</sup>

Hume agrees that the immediate objects of mind are always perceptions, but he does not take these to be, in one cardinal sense, representative of objects, neither impression nor ideas resemble objects. He proceeds to prove this point when he states that; all ideas come from antecedent impressions (the copy principle) (*Treatise II*).<sup>27</sup> In Hume's view, the way to clarify ideas, including the idea of causation, is to determine what impressions they derive from. An idea without an impression will be dismissed as "without any meaning". This is a very important strategic device in Hume's theory, without which Hume cannot reach his conclusion.

Some critics however argue that, an idea without an impression is not to be dismissed as 'without any meaning' but is actually counter-evidence against Hume's whole empiricism. If we produce an idea, like power or necessary connection, that we maintain is not derived from an antecedent impression, it is incumbent upon Hume to produce the impression or abandon his empiricism. Until Hume shifts the burden of proof, his own work provides some of the best evidence against empiricism. As we think, ideas without impressions really exist. For example, the idea of a high-dimensional space in math has no corresponding

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<sup>25</sup> See Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, II.

<sup>26</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, II.

<sup>27</sup> Hume, D. *Treatise of Human Nature*, II

impression. Such high-dimensional spaces are defined by abstract algebraic relations.<sup>28</sup>

Hume's primary concern in Book 1 of the *Treatise* is with our perceptions, qua perceptions, with perceptions as, simply, the elements or objects of the mind and not as representations of external existences. Having focused on perceptions as the only objects of the mind, Hume goes on in Book 1 to show how some of these perceptions are interrelated or associated to produce still further perceptions, which are then projected onto a world putatively outside the mind. Somehow the mind is furnished with impressions of sensation. On examination, we find that not one of these impressions can of itself be taken as an accurate representation of space or time, causal connection, an external object, or even our own mind. We simply do not have sensory impressions of space, causal connection, external existence, and so on. But, notwithstanding this fact and the further fact that all our ideas are derived from impressions, we nonetheless do have ideas of space, causal connection, external existence, and so on and are nonetheless irredeemably committed to believing that there are real entities that correspond to each of these ideas.

It is in this context that one can argue that Hume, rivaled only by Darwin, has done the most to undermine in principle our confidence in arguments from design, that no man has influenced the history of philosophy to a deeper or more disturbing degree, and that Hume's *Treatise* is the founding document of cognitive science. It is also the most important philosophical works written in English.

For Honderich, Hume has it as merit when he avails that we can never have a priori knowledge of the world of experience, because we can never know that it is anything more than a flow of unconnected impressions in which anything is possible and nothing is logically necessary. As a matter of fact, experience does appear this way in dreams where it is possible for clocks to melt and change into flowers that then explode in a burst of colors. In dreams anything can happen, and any experience can be followed by any other experience. However, we label these experiences as "subjective" because we can contrast them with the realm of objective experiences. According to Kant, when sensations appear together in

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<sup>28</sup> Kenny, A. *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (London: Blackwell Publishers Ltd, 2006), Pg. 58.

more or less consistent and permanent groups and when they are similar to what is experienced by others, we experience these collections of sensations as objects within the objective world. The exertion by Kant is a proof of the merit of Hume's theory of impression.<sup>29</sup>

We are able to form empirical concepts such as "frogs," "stars," or "apple" by means of the category of substance. By means of this category, for example, we organize the sensations of redness, roundness, sweetness and crunchiness into the unity we call "apple." Kant agrees with Hume that substance is not an empirical category acquired through sensation. At the same time, it is not some metaphysical reality beneath the appearances as Descartes and Locke thought. Instead, substance is a logical category by means of sensations from the flow of experience and unifies them into meaningful units that we identify as objects. We can sometimes be mistaken in identifying particular complexes of sensations, but we will always organize experience in terms of substances.<sup>30</sup>

By impression' Hume claims that, it is from the disposition of visible and tangible objects that we receive the idea of space, so from the succession of ideas and impressions we form the idea of time." The abstract idea of time, like all other abstract ideas, is represented in the imagination by a particular individual idea of a determinate quantity and quality joined to a term, 'time', that has general reference. In short, the imagination, a faculty not typically assigned so significant a role, achieves what neither the senses nor reason can achieve.<sup>31</sup>

On the flip side, it must be stated that Hume's theory of impression is not without flaws. All ideas come from antecedent impressions (the copy principle). In Treatise II, Hume argues that the way to clarify ideas, including the idea of causation, is to determine what impressions they derive from. An idea without an impression will be dismissed as "without any meaning". This is a very important strategic device in Hume's theory, without which Hume cannot reach his conclusion. The rebuttal to the above will be that, an idea without an impression is not to be dismissed as "without any meaning" but is actually counter-evidence against Hume's whole empiricism. If we produce an idea, like

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<sup>29</sup> Honderich, T. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), Pg. 512.

<sup>30</sup> Honderich T. *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, Pg. 512.

<sup>31</sup> Lawhead, W. *The Voyage of Discovery: A Historical Introduction to Philosophy* (Belmont: Wadsworth, 2002), Pg. 412.

power or necessary connection, that we maintain is not derived from an antecedent impression, it is incumbent upon Hume to produce the impression or abandon his empiricism. Until Hume shifts the burden of proof, his own work provides some of the best evidence against empiricism. As we think, ideas without impressions really exist. For example, the idea of a high-dimensional space in math has no corresponding impression. Such high-dimensional spaces are defined by abstract algebraic relations. We simply have no its impression.

Hume's main or "official" way of distinguishing between impressions and ideas is to say that impressions are lively, vivid, or "forcible," whereas ideas are "faint" or "dull." But Hume adds immediately that a person whose mind is "disordered by disease or madness" may have ideas that are "altogether indistinguishable" from his or her impressions. Hume's point here is that people who are insane, or suffering from psychotic delusions or hallucinations, may have ideas which are every bit as vivid or lively as their impressions of sensation. Now in stressing this, Hume is tacitly appealing to a criterion for distinguishing between impressions of sensation and ideas other than vivacity, because he still calls a deranged person's vivid hallucinations "ideas;" but their vividness would force him to classify them as impressions, if vividness or vivacity were the operative criterion for distinguishing between impressions and ideas. What other criterion, then, is Hume appealing to?

As Jonathan Bennett has pointed out, he is appealing to the criterion of objectivity, according to which impressions of sensation are experiences had when people really perceive physical objects; whereas hallucinations, no matter how vivid they may be, are only ideas.<sup>32</sup> Hume's theory of impression has the famous case of the "missing shade of blue," where he asks us to imagine a person who has seen every shade of blue from the darkest to the lightest, except for just one intermediate shade. Hume then asks whether this person could conjure up imaginatively the idea of that "missing" shade of blue, despite never having had an impression of it. Hume answers, plausibly enough, that the person could conjure up or visualize the missing shade. Notice that this case is a direct and convincing counterexample to Hume's own principle.

For the idea of the missing shade of blue is by hypothesis not derived from any corresponding impression; nor can it be broken down into simpler ideas each of which is derived from a

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<sup>32</sup> See Jonathan Bennett's edited *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Pg. 140.

corresponding impression, because it is not composed of parts. Rather, the idea of any shade of blue is uniform, uncompounded, or simple; so that, unlike the idea of a centaur, it cannot be divided up into component ideas, each of which might be derived from different impressions. Furthermore, it seems that other examples of the same sort can easily be given; involving shades of other colors and perhaps also sounds. Yet, Hume dismisses the example as unimportant, saying that 'it does not merit, that for it alone we should alter our general maxim'. This is certainly puzzling: how can Hume maintain his principle, even though he knows that there is a clear counterexample to it.<sup>33</sup>

Hume's point about defective sensory organs also runs into difficulty. For example, suppose that instead of becoming deaf in his later years, Beethoven had been deaf from birth, and so had never had any impressions of sound. What could Hume say if our congenitally deaf Beethoven assured him that he knew very well what sound was, and presented him with the scores of his nine symphonies, thirty-two piano sonatas, etc., as evidence? It looks very much as if, in the face of such evidence, Hume would have to admit that his principle was false?

### **Epistemological Implications of Hume's Theory of Impression**

A couple of implications can be drawn from Hume's theory of impression for epistemology. Parmenides might well claim to be the founder of epistemology. At least he is the first philosopher to make a systematic distinction between knowledge and belief. At the beginning of his great poem a goddess promises that he will learn all things, both reliable truth and the untrustworthy opinions of mortals. Nevertheless, Hume has intimates us with his theory of impression which aid us to understand better 'epistemology'.

Hume wanted to build a science of human nature by using the methods of physical science. His wide acquaintance with literature had shown him how often conflicting opinions are offered to readers on all subjects. He considered this conflict of opinions the symptom of a serious philosophical problem,

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<sup>33</sup> See Jonathan Bennett's edited *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Pg. 13.

How can we know the true nature of things? If artful authors can lead readers to accept conflicting ideas about morality, religions, and the true nature of physical reality, are these ideas equally true, or is there some method by which to discover the reason for this conflict of ideas? Hume shared the optimism of his day, which saw in the scientific method the means for solving all the problems of the world. He believed that such a method could lead us to a clear understanding of human nature and, in particular, the workings of the human mind.<sup>34</sup>

By implication, as Hume traced the process by which ideas are formed in the mind, he was startled to discover how limited is the range of human thought. Both Locke and Berkeley had come to this same point, but neither one took his own account of the origin of ideas seriously enough to rest his theory of knowledge wholly upon it. They still had recourse to the “commonsense” beliefs of people, which they were not willing to give up entirely. Although they argued that all our ideas come from experience, they felt confident that experience can give us certainty of knowledge on many subjects. Hume, on the other hand, concluded that if we take seriously the premise that all our ideas come from experience, we must accept the limits of knowledge that this explanation of ideas forces upon us, no matter what our customary beliefs may suggest.

The only way, as Hume argues, to solve the problem of disagreements and a speculation regarding “abstruse questions” is to “enquire seriously into the nature of human understanding, and show from an exact analysis of its powers and capacity, that it is by no means fitted for such remote and abstruse subjects.” Accordingly, Hume carefully analyzed a series of topics that led him to his conclusion, beginning with an account of the contents of the mind.

Nothing seems more unbounded, according to Hume, than human thought. Although our bodies are confined to one planet, our minds can roam the most distant regions of the universe. Nor, it may seem, is the mind bound by the limits of nature or reality, for without difficulty the imagination can conceive the most unnatural and incongruous appearances, such as flying horses and gold mountains. But, though the mind seems to possess this wide freedom, it is, Hume argues, really confined within very narrow limits. In the final analysis the contents of the mind can be reduced to the materials given us by the senses and

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<sup>34</sup> Scruton, R. *The Short History of Western Philosophy: from Descartes to Wittgenstein*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), Pg. 43



experience, and those materials Hume calls perceptions. The perceptions of the mind take two forms, which Hume distinguishes as impressions and ideas.<sup>35</sup>

Impressions and ideas make up the total content of the mind. The original stuff of thought is an impression (a sensation or feeling), and an idea is merely a copy of an impression. According to Hume, the difference between an impression and an idea is only the degree of their vividness. The original perception is an impression, as when we hear, see, feel, love, hate, desire, or will. These impressions are “lively” and clear when we have them. When we reflect on these impressions, we have ideas of them, and those ideas are less lively versions of the original impressions. To feel pain is an impression, whereas the memory of this sensation is an idea. In every particular, impressions and their corresponding ideas are alike, differing only in their degree of vividness.

Besides distinguishing between impressions and ideas, Hume argues that without impressions there can be no ideas. For if an idea is simply a copy of an impression, it follows that for every idea there must be a prior impression. Not every idea, however, reflects an exact corresponding impression, for we have never seen a flying horse or a golden mountain even though we have ideas of them. But Hume explains such ideas as being the product of the mind’s faculty of compounding, transposing, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience. When we think of a flying horse, our imagination joins two ideas, wings and horse that we originally acquired as impressions through our senses. If we have any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea, we need to but enquire, from what impression is that supposed idea derived? And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion. Hume subjected even the idea of God to this test and concluded that it arises from reflecting on the operations of our own minds ‘augmenting without limit’ the qualities of goodness and wisdom that we experience among human beings.

Furthermore, the implication of Hume’s theory of impression to epistemology can be discerned from his notion of “relation of ideas.” It is not by mere chance that our ideas are related to each other. Hume could be read as holding that there must be some bond of union, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another. Hume calls it ‘a gentle force’, which prevails and points out to everyone those simple ideas, which are most proper to be united in

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<sup>35</sup> Dicker, G. *Hume’s Epistemology and Metaphysics: An Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1998), Pg. 14.

a complex one. It is not a special faculty of the mind that associates one idea with another, for Hume has no impression of the structural equipment of the mind. But by observing the actual patterns of our thinking and analyzing the groupings of our ideas, Hume thought he had discovered an explanation for the association of ideas. His explanation was that, whenever there are certain qualities in ideas, these ideas are associated with each other. These qualities are three in number: resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause and effect. Hume believed that the connections of all ideas to each other could be explained by these qualities and gave the following examples of how they work:

A picture naturally leads our thoughts to the original (resemblance): the mention of one apartment in the building naturally introduces an enquiry . . . concerning the others (contiguity) and if we think of a wound, we can scarcely forebear reflecting on the pain which follows it (cause and effect). There are no operations of the mind that differ in principle from one of these three examples of the association of ideas. But of these, the notion of cause and effect was considered by Hume to be the central element in knowledge. He took the position that the causal principle is the foundation on which the validity of all knowledge depends. If there is any flaw in the causal principle, we can have no certainty of knowledge.<sup>36</sup>

Deeply, Hume's most original and influential ideas deal with the problem of causality. Neither Locke nor Berkeley challenged the basic principle of causality. Although Berkeley did argue that we cannot discover efficient causes in things, his intention was to look for the cause of phenomena, and therefore the predictable order of nature, in God's activity. For Hume the very idea of causality is suspect, and he approaches the problem by asking "What is the origin of the idea of causality?"<sup>37</sup> Since ideas are copies of impressions, Hume asks what impression gives us the idea of causality. His answer is that there is no impression corresponding to this idea.

How, then, does the idea of causality arise in the mind? For Hume, it must be that the idea of causality arises in the mind when we experience certain relations between objects. When we speak of cause and effect, we mean to say that A causes B. But what kind of a relation does this show between A and B?

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<sup>36</sup> Gao, S. "Hume's Analysis of Causality: Its Limitations and implications", Pg. 16.

<sup>37</sup> Stroud, B. *Hume*. (New York: Routledge, 2003), Pg. 17.

Experience furnishes us with two relations: (1) contiguity, for A and B are always close together, and (2) priority in time, for A, the “cause,” always precedes B, the “effect.” But there is still another relation that the idea of causality suggests to common sense, namely, that between A and B there is a “necessary connection.” But neither contiguity nor priority implies “necessary” connection between objects.<sup>38</sup>

For Hume, there is no object that implies the existence of another when we consider objects individually. No amount of observation of oxygen can ever tell us that when mixed with hydrogen it will necessarily give us water. We know this only after we have seen the two together. It is therefore by experience only that we can infer the existence of one object from another. While we do have impressions of contiguity in space and priority in time, we do not have any impression of necessary connection. Thus, causality is not a quality in the objects we observe but is rather a mental habit of association produced by the repetition of instances of A and B. Insofar as Hume assumed that the causal principle is central to all kinds of knowledge; his attack on this principle undermined the validity of all knowledge. He saw no reason for accepting the principle that whatever begins to exist must have a cause of existence as either intuitive or capable of demonstration. In the end Hume considered thinking or reasoning “a species of sensation and as such our thinking cannot extend beyond our immediate experiences.”<sup>39</sup>

Finally, it must be state here that Hume could not come to terms with the fact that causality as Kant will later argue is exactly how the mind functions and it does so in through the procedure of induction and deduction. Hence, one can argue that Hume would have known these had he considered necessary, the a priori function of the mind. The epistemological implication of the above is that Hume’s theory of impression in particular and his theory of knowledge in general can be accused of being reductionists in its approach as it undermines the a priori function of the mind and its power to gather sure knowledge of things.

## **Conclusion**

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<sup>38</sup> Gao, S. “Hume’s Analysis of Causality: Its Limitations and implications”, Pg. 17

<sup>39</sup> Gao, S. “Hume’s Analysis of Causality: Its Limitations and implications”, Pg. 17.

In the preceding paragraphs, attempts have been made to explicate as well as reflect on Hume's theory of impression. To do this, the present paper proceeded from a preliminary discourse on what constitutes impression in the thought of Hume through a critique of his theory of impression to a discourse on the implications of the theory for the search for knowledge. What is to be noted is that Hume, as one of the greatest proponent and sustainer of the ideals of the empiricist tradition advanced the concept of impression in his scheme. By impression, he meant any visual or auditory experience or even pain. It must also be noted that Hume's version of empiricism dies hard. The attempt of this paper to reflect on Hume's theory of impression reveals that for Hume, without impression, there can be no ideas. It also reveals that impression and ideas constitutes the content of the mind in his thoughts. The major argument against Hume's position is that an idea without impression should not be refuted and dismissed as having no meaning; this argument is hinged on the fact of the existence of a plethora of ideas that have no link with impression. The flaws of Hume's theory notwithstanding, Hume theory of impression is merited in the fact that it served to sustain the discourse on knowledge even to the enlightenment period.