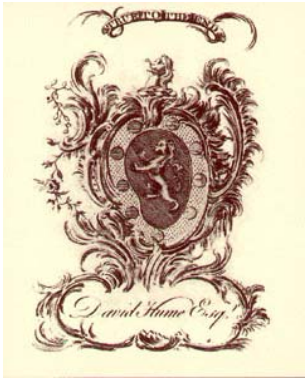

‘Lively’ Memory and ‘Past’ Memory
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'LIVELY' MEMORY AND 'PAST' MEMORY

At the very beginning of the Treatise Hume distinguishes memory from imagination by noting two different features of ideas of memory not shared by ideas of imagination.[1] The distinguishing marks of memory can be described as (1) memory conceived in terms of the liveliness or vivacity of its ideas and (2) memory conceived in terms of the constraints imposed on the order and form of its ideas by the original impressions from which these ideas have been derived. Both of these conceptions of memory, according to Hume in this initial description, serve to distinguish ideas of memory from ideas of imagination. For purposes of brevity I shall call them, respectively, 'lively' memory and 'past' memory.[2]

In this paper I shall be concerned with four main issues arising from Hume's dual characterization of memory. First, I shall call attention to a point whose importance Hume scholars have not, I think, fully appreciated; namely, that later in Book I of the Treatise (Part III, Section V) Hume recognizes that his original dual characterization is not viable because it cannot be fit into his general theory of ideas and that, therefore, one of his two distinguishing features of memory must be abandoned. Second, I shall consider some problems generated by his abandonment of this conception of memory. Third, I shall construct a Humean solution to these problems, based on Hume's revised conception of memory -- a solution that he suggests but never develops. Finally, I shall apply Hume's revised characterization of memory to a central issue in his philosophy, his conception of the self, and show that, although he does not himself use it in his own

analysis, this characterization can provide a Humean explanation of our belief in our selves. My line of argument, which will depart not only from that of Hume but also of most of his commentators, is by no means free of difficulties; nevertheless, it has, I think, the virtue of being more consistent with Hume's general theory of ideas, hence is more Humean, than his own.

To set the stage for our discussion I shall begin with Hume's initial description of memory and its difference from imagination, as it appears at the beginning of the Treatise. He writes as follows:

> We find by experience, that when any impression has been present with the mind, it again makes its appearance there as an idea; and this it may do after two different ways: either when in its new appearance it retains a considerable degree of its first vivacity, and is somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea; or when it entirely loses that vivacity, and is a perfect idea. The faculty, by which we repeat our impressions in the first manner, is called the MEMORY, and the other the IMAGINATION....
>
> There is another difference betwixt these two kinds of ideas, which is no less evident, namely that tho' neither the ideas of the memory nor imagination, neither the lively nor faint ideas can make their appearance in the mind, unless their correspondent impressions have gone before to prepare the way for them, yet the imagination is not restrain'd to the same order and form with the original impressions; while the memory is in a manner ty'd down in that respect, without any power of variation (T 8-9)

A few comments on this passage are in order. Hume distinguishes memory from imagination on two grounds: (1) the experienced quality of the ideas

themselves and (2) the power or the faculty of the mind that produces them. Memory-ideas, as they actually occupy our consciousness, are lively and strong; imagination ideas are faint and languid. Also, memory and imagination, as separate faculties of the mind, differ in their power. Imagination is free to play with its ideas as it pleases; it can arrange and rearrange them at will, to allow us to contemplate "winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants." (T 10) Memory, however, has no such power but must reproduce impressions as memory-ideas in the same order and form as they originally appeared in the mind.

It requires little explanation to understand why Hume distinguished between memory and imagination according to the criterion of relative vivacity. Assuming that one is attempting to distinguish between the two and recognizing that, in fact, the ideas of memory generally seem stronger and more compelling than those of imagination, what more natural than to make this greater strength a distinctive mark of memory-ideas? The reason why Hume limited the power of memory to arrange its ideas in a way that he did not limit that of imagination is a more complex issue. One can base one's explanation, as most of us do and as Hume himself did in Section III, on the tie between memory and the past. Memory is the faculty by which we repeat or, as he says later in Book I, "raise up" (T 260) images of past impressions. If we did not raise up these perceptions in the same order and form as that in which we originally perceived them, we simply would not call our activity one of memory.

So much, then, for Hume's initial account of memory and its two differences from imagination. In part it conforms to our common-sense beliefs.

Certainly few would take exception to Hume's view that, if we really remember some past event, our memory must reproduce that event as it was. On his view that memory differs from imagination by its greater liveliness or vivacity, however, questions would be raised. Although we might agree that this is often true, few would accept Hume's claim that it is a characteristic by which we can invariably distinguish one from the other.

Even if we put such qualifications aside, however, we find that Hume has problems with memory, which arise from his general theory of ideas and their connections with impressions. He does not recognize these problems immediately but finally comes to grips with them in Section V of Part III of Book I. The main difficulty can be put in the form of the following question: How do we go about distinguishing a memory-idea from an imagination idea in practice? Or, to sharpen the problem, How are we able to tell when we are <u>really</u> remembering some past event instead of only imagining that we remember it? The answer to this question would seem to be simple. Since we have at our disposal two marks by which to distinguish memory-ideas from imagination-ideas, all that we need to do is to determine whether the idea in question satisfies one of them. If it satisfies either, it is a memory-idea; if it satisfies neither, it must be an imagination-idea. Furthermore, since every memory-idea satisfies both criteria, it should be immaterial to which we appeal in making our test.

At this point, however, we face a difficulty. It is relatively easy to apply the vivacity test and recognize an idea in our consciousness as a 'lively' memory-idea, thus separating it from imagination-ideas. But how do we go about applying the other test -- the one that requires of an idea, if it is to

qualify as a memory-idea, that it replicate the impression it repeats -- in order to determine whether it is a 'past' memory idea? To apply this test successfully to any idea, we must be able to compare the idea with the past impression to decide whether the two do, in fact, replicate each other. But it is impossible for us to perform such a test because the impression in question, which we must have before our consciousness in order to make the comparison, no longer exists. Hume recognizes this difficulty, which he sums up in the following way:

> For tho' it be a peculiar property of the memory to preserve the original order and position of its ideas, while the imagination transposes and changes them, as it pleases; yet this difference is not sufficient to distinguish them in their operation, or make us know the one from the other; it being impossible to recal the past impressions, in order to compare them with our present ideas, and see whether their arrangement be exactly similar. (T 85)

Since it is impossible in practice to use 'past' memory as a way of distinguishing memory-ideas from imagination-ideas, one seems forced to conclude that it must be discarded as a distinguishing feature of memory. This leaves only 'lively' memory as a way of making the distinction. In Section V Hume comes to the same conclusion. In the sentence immediately following the one I have just quoted he writes: "Since therefore the memory is known, neither by the order of its <u>complex</u> ideas, nor the nature of its <u>simple</u> ones; it follows, that the difference betwixt it and the imagination lies in its superior force and vivacity." (T 85)[3]

Since Hume's conclusion in Section V that he must abandon 'past' memory has important consequences, we should pause a moment to be sure it is

correct. One might say, against him, that, although we cannot claim beyond doubt that our 'past' memory-ideas, which occur in the present, exactly replicate the past perceptions of which they are images, still we can have sufficient confidence in this to distinguish them from imagination-ideas, which we can manipulate at will. Hume is, I think, correct in not accepting such a solution to his problem. Since the past perceptions are intrinsically irretrievable, and so are unavailable for purposes of comparison, we have no grounds whatsoever for supposing that our 'past' memory-ideas resemble them in the slightest way. Indeed, we can go further by recognizing that the past perceptions in question may never have existed at all, for the simple reason that there has been no past. For these reasons, the past, conceived as something that we know once existed, can play no role in Hume's theory of memory. This he recognizes by his abandonment of 'past' memory in Section V.

Although we may think that Hume's modification of his dual theory of memory in his revised theory of Section V constitutes a grave loss, we should suspend judgment until we see what he can accomplish by an appeal to his remaining alternative, 'lively' memory. Prima facie it provides him with a criterion he can apply to ideas that is sufficient to enable him to separate memory-ideas from imagination-ideas. However, reliance on 'lively' ideas alone gives rise to a further problem, one that Hume almost, but not quite, succeeded in recognizing. The problem surfaces almost immediately, but in a way that Hume himself misses, because of his misinterpretation of the example he introduces. The example in question concerns liars. He writes:

> And as an idea of the memory, by losing its force and vivacity, may degenerate to such a degree, as to be

> taken for an idea of the imagination; so on the other hand an idea of the imagination may acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment. This is noted in the case of liars; who by frequent repetition of their lies, come at last to believe and remember them as realities.... (T 86 -- emphasis added)

This passage requires extensive comment, first, because it is confused on certain points and, second, because of its consequences. To begin with the confusions, special note must be taken in the first sentence of the words I have emphasized -- "to be taken for," "to pass for," and "counterfeit." This terminology, given that Hume has just concluded that we must rely solely on 'lively' memory to distinguish between memory and imagination, is misleading because it implies that a memory-idea, when it degenerates in force and vivacity, is still a memory-idea -- it is only "taken for" an imagination-idea -- and an imagination-idea, when it acquires these, although it "passes for" or "counterfeits" a memory-idea, is still an imagination-idea. But this cannot be, because the only thing that makes an idea the kind of idea it is, either of memory or imagination, is its relative force or vivacity. A weakened memory-idea cannot be taken for an imagination-idea for the simple reason that it now is an imagination-idea. Reversing direction, an imagination-idea that acquires force and vivacity cannot pass for or counterfeit a memory-idea because it now is a memory-idea.

Turning in the second sentence to the situation of the liar, Hume writes in a more ambiguous way. He seems to be saying that liars who come to believe their lies, because such belief makes

the tales they tell very vivid to them, "remember as realities" that about which they are lying. The difficulty with this account is that it is inconsistent. If liars come to believe their lies, hence heighten their vivacity as ideas in the liars' minds, these ideas, according to Hume's 'lively' memory criterion, change their nature from imagination-ideas to memory-ideas. Thus Hume is quite correct in saying that such people remember their tales as realities, for we have here a straightforward case of memory at work. For this reason he is wrong in still referring to the people in question as liars, for what one remembers as a reality cannot be something one is lying about.

Having cleared up the confusions in his account, we can turn to our second point -- the consequences of Hume's revised view of memory. These are important and disquieting. Let us begin with the liar. As we have seen, Hume should, in consistency, conclude that the liar, who by constant repetition of his lies comes to believe what he says, is no longer a liar. As the ideas he conjures up become increasingly vivid to him, a point is reached at which they are transformed from imagination-ideas into memory-ideas. This Humean analysis, however, raises questions. Most of us would want to say, as Hume himself does, that the liar is still a liar, regardless of how vivid his lies become to him. Still other awkward consequences follow from Hume's view. Consider the situation in which two people are describing the same past event. They give different descriptions of the event so the question arises: Who is remembering what happened and who is misremembering (only imagining) what occurred? The answer to this question must be found in the relative vivacity of their respective ideas. If the ideas of one are

quite lively and those of the other faint, we must conclude that the first is remembering and the second only imagining. But this, although it may be a factor in our decision, is certainly not the final basis on which we should ordinarily decide; rather we should want to say that the one who is remembering must be the person whose ideas conform to what happened in the past, even though the other person may have more lively ideas about what took place. Or, again, consider the following situation: I have a lively idea concerning some past event; therefore I remember it. Later, in thinking about the same event, I have an equally lively idea concerning it; therefore I am remembering it again. However, the two ideas I have of this event are inconsistent with each other. As a result, at least one of them must be false. Yet, in Hume's view, both of my recollections must be authentic cases of memory. It follows that, on at least one of the occasions, I am remembering something that didn't happen. And this, to say the least, is paradoxical.

Can a Humean solution be found to the objections to his revised theory of memory implied by my examples? I think it can, but it requires us to give up our ordinary conception of memory, in particular, its link to the past. Looking back over my examples it is apparent that their force as objections to Hume rests on the assumption that memory is linked to the past in such a way that our ideas, to be cases of authentic memory, must replicate the past event we are claiming to remember. The nature of the past defines and controls memory. In the terminology we have adopted, the paradoxes that we find in the examples rest on our assumption of 'past' memory. But this is precisely the conception of memory that Hume has found himself

forced to abandon. Thus all of our objections, as far as Hume's revised theory of memory is concerned, simply beg the question against him.

But the difference between the conception of memory represented by my examples and Hume's revised theory raises a broader question. By appealing to what actually happened, as a confirmation that an idea we now have is a memory-idea, we all make two assumptions: That something called 'the past' existed and that its nature is knowable. Since, if we reject the second assumption, the first becomes redundant, we should begin by asking ourselves: Is the past, to which we refer in our analysis of memory, really knowable? More pertinently, since we are concerned with understanding Hume's conception of memory, we must ask: Is the past knowable for Hume? This question can, I think, be answered quite easily. For Hume, to know something requires at least that one have a perception of it. Since perceptions consist either of impressions or ideas, it follows that, to know a past event, we must have either an impression or an idea of it. Clearly it is impossible to have an impression of a past event because impressions all come to us through our senses and our senses record only the present. The only way we could come to know the past, then, is to have an idea of it. But this we cannot have either. In the first place, an idea, like an impression, is a present occurrence. Therefore, it cannot directly portray the past. The only way in which it could link us to the past would be through replicating that past in memory -- in other words, by being a 'past' memory-idea. But, by his argument in Section V, Hume has shown that, to justify the conclusion that a memory-idea replicates the past, we must bring the past event into the present. And that is impossible.

It follows that, because a necessary condition for our having knowledge of the past cannot be fulfilled within Hume's epistemology, we can have no such knowledge. Therefore, we must drop the concept of the past, as it is ordinarily understood as something that once existed, from our account of memory. 'Past' memory must be abandoned in favor of 'present' memory, which in Hume's theory is equivalent to 'lively' memory.

This analysis gives us a Humean solution to our dilemmas. For example, my case of the person who remembered a past event in one way and later remembered it in a different way is no longer troublesome. The only reason it appears to be a problem lies in our assumption that, to remember the event, the individual's memory-idea must replicate what actually occurred; i.e., 'the past.' Once this assumption is dropped we no longer face a dilemma. If the person has a lively idea of the event as being of a certain nature, then he remembers it in that way; if, later, he has a lively idea of its having been of a different nature, then he remembers it in that way. Both are equally cases of remembering, and that is the end of the matter. This may not be what we ordinarily mean by memory but then Hume's is no ordinary theory.

Yet some concern may still linger, because most of us are loath to break the tie between memory and a real, knowable past. Although Hume cannot satisfy this feeling in the way in which I have put it, I think it is possible for him to reinterpret the link in such a way that a Humean notion of the past can have a role to play in his theory of memory. Although he does not develop this point in his discussion of his revised theory of memory in Section V, he drops a hint from which a theory can be

constructed. In the last paragraph of the section he writes: "Thus it appears, that the belief or assent, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination." (T 86) The key concept here is belief. According to his well-known definition, "An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION." (T 96) For our purposes, the important point in this definition is Hume's description of a belief as a lively idea. In this respect it shares the same characteristic as a memory-idea. This does not mean that beliefs and memories are the same, because belief is a broader category than memory, including not only ideas that refer to the past but others as well. Memory-ideas, thus, are a species of belief-ideas in general. When one has a 'lively' memory-idea he believes that he is recollecting a past event. Or, to put it in another way, to remember that some event occurred in the past is to believe that it occurred. And it is nothing more. We now have an explanation of why the persistent liar, who finally comes to believe his own lies, is no longer a liar. By believing them he has a lively idea of them and this by definition is to remember them.

Generalizing from this example we can go on to explain how Hume's theory of belief can reinterpret the role 'the past' plays in our memories. Accepting the conclusion that the past, as past, is unknowable, we can still believe in it. By believing in it, we create the past, in the only sense in which it has reality. The past just is what we believe it to be at any given time. It does not exist in the past but only in the present -- in our

beliefs. As a result, although two people may have conflicting beliefs about the past, or one person may change his beliefs about it, no contradictions result because we are no longer talking about an existent, knowable past against which our memory-beliefs must be judged but rather only about our present beliefs.

I shall conclude my paper with a brief discussion of a problem of central importance to the Treatise, one to which Hume's revised theory of memory is directly pertinent. As is well known, Hume makes use of memory in his explanations of our belief in the external world, cause and effect, and the self or mind. I shall limit myself in what follows to the role memory plays in his theory of the self, which is central to his account of the other two. In Section VI of Part IV of Book I, after demolishing the notion that we have any impression, therefore any possible knowledge of a substantial, enduring self, Hume proceeds to develop his own explanation of why we believe in the existence of such a self. Memory plays a central role in this explanation. As he writes:

> ...suppose we cou'd see clearly into the breast of another, and observe that succession of perceptions, which constitutes his mind or thinking principle, and suppose that he always preserves the memory of a considerable part of past perceptions; 'tis evident that nothing cou'd more contribute to the bestowing a relation on this succession amidst all its variations. For what is the memory but a faculty, by which we raise up the images of past perceptions? ...
>
> As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, 'tis to be consider'd, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity (T 260-261).

This account gives rise to two questions: (1) To which type of memory is Hume appealing here -- 'lively' memory or 'past' memory? (2) Does his account remain viable, if we understand by memory 'lively' memory? Our first question can, I think, be answered fairly surely. The clue lies in one sentence in the passage just quoted: "For what is the memory but a faculty, by which we raise up the images of past perceptions?" This rhetorical question seems clearly to indicate that Hume is appealing to 'past' memory in his theory of the self.[4] Most commentators on Hume have accepted this line of thought and have assumed, in their discussions of his theory of the self, that he must rely on 'past' memory to give his account whatever viability it has. For example, Barry Stroud, in his gloss on Hume's view, writes:

> There are resemblances among many of the perceptions that constitute a person primarily because people remember many of their past experiences.... To remember is to have a perception which represents, and therefore resembles, the past perception it is a memory of, and so one result of the fact that we remember our past experiences is a greater degree of resemblance among those perceptions that constitute our mind.[5]

But, given the argument of this paper, we cannot accept such a conception of memory as part of Hume's theory of the self, because he was forced to abandon that conception in Part III. Rather we must try to forge a quite different analysis of the role played by memory in his theory. To do so we must turn to the remaining alternative in Hume's revised conception of memory; namely, 'lively' memory. This leads us to our second question: Can Hume, relying solely on the concept of 'lively' memory, develop an equally

viable theory of the self? I am not sure that he can, but at least he can develop one that is consistent with his general theory of ideas.

If we look at Hume's theory of the self in terms of his use of 'lively' memory, we must begin by specifying the idea which, by being lively, becomes the memory-idea to which he is appealing in his explanation. This cannot be an idea of the self as an enduring entity because we can have no such idea. (T 252) It cannot be an idea of the past, because ideas are present occurrences and we have no grounds for asserting that they replicate past perceptions. What, then, is the content of this 'lively' memory idea? We can answer this question by going back to our persistent liar and recognizing an analogy between him and ourselves. Just as, when he comes to believe tales that are fictions, he remembers these non-existent events, so we too, through our beliefs in the past existence of our selves, are by that very fact remembering them. Thus, the 'lively' idea to which Hume must, and can, appeal is the idea consisting of the belief we have that we are indeed entities having a past and enduring through time. By having this belief, we remember our past existence in the only way in which we can remember it. It must be emphasized, however, that on this account no assumptions are being made about any real existence we have had in the past. That is strictly unknowable, and hence is irrelevant to Hume's explanation. As far as he is concerned, the self, as an entity enduring through time, must remain a fiction, just as the liar's tales remain fictions, even though he is no longer a liar. He remembers these tales because he believes in them; we remember our past existence because we believe in it. The

memory and the belief are the same. For Hume to have been is to believe that we have been. The fiction of personal identity is no longer a fiction.

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1. See David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), Book I, Part I, Section III. Further references to the Treatise will be cited as 'T' followed by the relevant page number(s).

2. In an interesting essay on the same topic as this paper -- but one in which he follows a different line of argument from my own -- James Noxon labels Hume's two characterizations of memory the 'phenomenal' and 'epistemic' senses of memory. See J. Noxon, "Remembering and Imagining the Past," in D.W. Livingston and J.T. King (eds.), Hume: A Re-Evaluation (New York: Fordham University Press, 1976), pp. 270-295.

3. In an Appendix added to the Treatise Hume elaborates his description of memory further. Although he makes a psychological point of considerable interest he does not add anything more to his view that memory must be confined to 'lively' memory. He concludes the Appendix passage by saying:

> Since ... the imagination can represent all the same objects that the memory can offer to us, and since those faculties are only distinguish'd by the different feeling of the ideas they present, it may be proper to consider what is the nature of that feeling. And here I believe every one will readily agree with me, that the ideas of the memory are more strong and lively than those of the fancy. (T 628)

4. In the Appendix to the Treatise, in a passage in which Hume discusses the nature of personal identity further, he implies that he still considers 'past' memory basic to his explanation of the self. (T 635) I cannot explain why Hume, after abandoning the notion of 'past' memory in Section V of Part III, uses it later in the Treatise as an explanatory principle.

5. Barry Stroud, Hume (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), pp. 122-123. For similar interpretations see also J. Bricke, Hume's Philosophy of Mind (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1980), pp. 85-88; J. Passmore, Hume's Intentions, 3rd ed. (London: Duckworth, 1980), p. 82; and T. Penelhum, Hume (London: Macmillan, 1975), pp. 78-79.