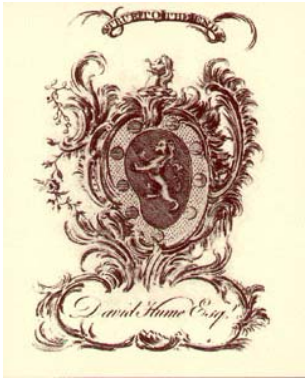

Remembering the Past
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REMEMBERING THE PAST

In his recent article "'Lively' Memory and 'Past' Memory," Oliver Johnson argues that the remarks in Treatise I.iii.5 entail that Hume rejects all mnemonic knowledge of the past and that "we must drop the concept of the past, as it is ordinarily understood as something that once existed, from our account of memory."[1] While I shall grant that Hume could claim no knowledge of the past, I do not believe Johnson has shown that Hume rejects the past from his account of memory. In this paper I argue that Johnson misconstrues the relationship between Hume's two 'criteria' for distinguishing between ideas of memory and ideas of the imagination. I also show that if Johnson's account were correct, much of Hume's philosophy would be incoherent.

Johnson begins by claiming that in Treatise I.i.3, Hume introduces two criteria for distinguishing between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination, namely, a criterion based on the greater force and liveliness of the idea of memory vis-a-vis the idea of imagination ('lively' memory) and a criterion based on the correspondence of the idea of memory to the impression from which it was derived ('past' memory).[2] After commenting that these criteria follow one's common sense beliefs regarding memory (LMPM 345-346), Johnson suggests that Hume came to realize that there is a problem with his initial characterization of the distinction. He sets the problem in the form of a 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 really 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. (LMPM 346)

Johnson goes on to show that in Treatise I.iii.5 Hume claims that the criterion for past memory "is not sufficient to distinguish them [ideas of the memory from ideas of the imagination] in their operation, or make us show 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,"[3] which he takes to mark Hume's rejection of the criterion of past memory (LMPM 347).

If a criterion is a principle that can be used to divide a class of objects into two subclasses without remainder, then, as Johnson presents them, both of Hume's 'criteria' are inadequate because each is too broad. The 'criterion' for past memory is concerned with the truth of an idea (cf. T 448 and 458), and, as such, it is equally applicable to ideas of memory and the imagination. For example, a historian's reconstruction of a past event might be true, but the reconstruction is certainly an idea of the imagination, not an idea of the memory.[4] Similarly, the 'criterion' for lively memory ('force and vivacity') is used to distinguish impressions from ideas (T 1) and beliefs regarding events of any temp-

oral location from ideas that are not believed (T 96) as well as ideas of the memory from ideas of the imagination.[5] Thus, neither 'criterion' can singularly mark the distinction between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination.

But if there is a problem with inadequate criteria, it is not clear that the problem is Hume's, for Hume did not claim that the 'criteria' can operate independently of one another. In Treatise I.i.3, Hume first discusses the 'criterion' for lively memory (T 8-9), and then he indicates that "There is another difference betwixt these two kinds of ideas, which is no less evident," viz., that "the memory is in a manner ty'd down" to the original form and order of the impressions remembered (T 9, emphasis added). By joining the two conditions, one can first limit the class of ideas to those that are forceful and vivacious and then limit that class to ideas that actually represent past impressions. Each of the conditions is a necessary condition for an idea to be an idea of memory, but, at best, they are only jointly sufficient conditions. But even if they are jointly sufficient conditions, this does not insure that one can know that any particular idea actually represents some complex past impression.[6]

Thus, Johnson seems to be correct in claiming that 'in practice' one appeals only to force and vivacity to distinguish between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination. But does the "criterion of lively memory" tell us how "we [are] able to tell when we are really remembering some past event instead of only imagining that we remember it" (LMPM 346)? No. One never can be assured that one's idea represents a past impression[7] at the time one is

remembering. But even if one is concerned solely with distinguishing ideas as psychological states, there seem to be instances in which the force and vivacity of the idea involved degenerates to such an extent that ideas of the memory are indistinguishable from ideas of the imagination. As Hume notes:

> The more recent this memory is, the clearer is the idea; and when after a long interval he would return to the contemplation of his object, he always finds its idea to be much decay'd, if not wholly obliterated. We are frequently in doubt concerning the ideas of the memory, as they become very weak and feeble; and are at a loss to determine whether any image proceeds from the fancy or the memory, when it is not drawn in such lively colours as distinguish that latter faculty. (T 85)

Here Hume seems to claim that even the criterion of lively memory cannot distinguish ideas of the memory from ideas of the imagination as psychological states. The case of the liar who repeats his lies so often that they "acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment" (T 86) suggests the same.

Johnson, however, provides us with a different account of the liar. After arguing that Hume rejected past memory in favor of lively memory and that "the past, conceived as something that we know once existed, can play no role in Hume's theory of memory" (LMPM 348), Johnson contends that the Hume of the liar passage was confused on several points. (1) With the rejection of past memory, it is only the force and vivacity criterion that remains. Hence, when an idea of the memory loses its force and vivacity, it does not "degenerate to such a degree, as to be taken for

an idea of the imagination" (T 86, emphasis added), rather, it is an idea of the imagination (LMPM 349). Similarly, the greater force and vivacity gained by one of a liar's ideas of the imagination indicates that it does not "pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment" (T 86, emphasis added), rather, it is an idea of the memory (LMPM 349). (2) Insofar as a liar's ideas are forceful and vivacious, liars "believe and remember them as realities" (T 86), which Johnson takes to imply that liars are no longer liars (LMPM 350).

If my earlier argument is sound and neither of the two 'criteria' for distinguishing between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination will singularly divide the class of ideas into ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination, then Johnson's reconstruction of the liar case fails. For an idea to be an idea of the memory it must be both forceful and vivacious -- thereby distinguishing a state of memory from other psychological states -- and closely resemble an earlier impression. And the fact that the force and vivacity of one's ideas can degenerate over time (T 85-86), suggests that the resemblance thesis is the more important of the two 'criteria'.[8] Thus, even though the liar comes to believe his lies after a time, he remains a liar, for it is by his own actions that he comes to believe what is false and initially was believed by the liar himself to be false.[9]

Given his 'corrected' account of the liar, Johnson concludes that Hume can claim no knowledge of the past on the basis of memory. In his words:

> 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 the 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 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 this 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. (LMPM 352-353)

Johnson is technically correct that Hume can claim no knowledge of the past on the basis of memory, but Hume's reasons have little to do with the argument Johnson provides. Knowledge, for Hume, is based upon a comparison of ideas, not a comparison of ideas with impressions (T 70, 124). Technically, no 'knowledge' of any matter of fact -- past, present, or future -- counts as knowledge: to attribute knowledge to purely factual claims is a category mistake. At most, Hume would seem to allow that one can have a causal 'proof' regarding the past (T 124; E 56n) and that one can construct a 'reality' on the basis of the coherence of memory and written documents. Hume gives an example

of constructing such a 'reality' in Treatise I.iii.9. There he writes:

> I form an idea of ROME, which I neither see nor remember; but which is connected with such impressions as I remember to have received from conversations and books of travellers and historians. This idea of Rome I place in a certain situation on the idea of an object, which I call the globe. I join to it the conception of a particular government, and religion, and manners. I look backward and consider its first foundations; its several revolutions, successes, and misfortunes. All this, and every thing else, which I believe, are nothing but ideas; tho' by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from the other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination. (T 108)

It is on the basis of a correlation of descriptions of Rome that one constructs an idea of Rome. This is a 'reality', that is, an idea one judges to represent a real object. Of course, there is no guarantee that anything corresponds to one's constructed idea. The idea constructed is based strictly upon the coherence of the various accounts of Rome with which one is familiar. Nor should one find such a claim surprising from a philosopher who held that "We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false" (T 84), and that "we might hope to establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop'd for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination" (T 272). Although one might not be able to know immediately that an idea of the memory is true, i.e., that it represents a past impression, one's memories

of the past are susceptible to the same kind of evidential examination as all other ideas: they can be checked against each other, against the memories of others (cf. T 627-628), and against written documents to determine whether a coherent past 'reality' can be constructed. Given the notorious fallibility of memory, this is pure common sense. If all the evidence coheres, one has a 'proof' that the past was as one remembers it: one can do no better than this with regard to any factual claim.[10]

But, perhaps, not all this argument is necessary to cast doubt on Johnson's interpretation of Hume's account of memory. If Hume rejected 'past memory', then much of his philosophy is incoherent. We already have noted Johnson's claim that Hume was 'confused' with respect to the case of the liar (LMPM 349-350). Johnson also notes that Hume was 'confused' regarding the role of memory in one's belief in personal identity (LMPM 356-357), a confusion that also is found in the Appendix (LMPM 359n4): in both cases Hume makes appeals to past memory. But we need not stop here. As Johnson recognizes (LMPM 355), memory plays a significant role in the explanation of one's belief in causal relationships (cf. T 125-155; E 40-55). Even if Hume could recast his explanation of one's belief in causal regularity solely in terms of 'lively memory', this would not explain how one draws inferences to "<u>those instances, of which we have had no experience</u>" from "<u>those, of which we have had experience</u>" (T 89; cf. E 37). Hume stated the problem of induction in terms of 'past memory'. Other than testimony, the only way to 'know' what has happened in the past is on the basis of memory, and if past memory is rejected, then experience can provide no basis for

inductive inferences. If there is no basis for inductive inferences, then there are neither grounds for choosing one's future actions nor grounds for an evidentiary evaluation of one's own beliefs or of the testimony of others (cf. E 109-131): virtually all our moorings in experience are cut loose. Among the things Hume would lose are all grounds for accepting the copy theory of simple ideas. Finally, Hume's remarks on the virtue of a good memory make little sense if 'good memory' is nothing more than a tendency to have lively ideas (T 612-613; E 241).

Thus, if Johnson's thesis that Hume rejected past memory is correct, Hume's philosophy is extremely paradoxical if not incoherent. On the other hand, if Hume's two 'criteria' for distinguishing between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination are successful only if they run in tandem, or if the criterion of past memory must be construed as a causal thesis and the 'criterion' of lively memory is nothing more than a rough and ready principle that is commonly employed to draw that distinction, then the bulk of Hume's philosophy remains intact.

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1. Oliver Johnson, "'Lively' Memory and 'Past' Memory," Hume Studies 13 (1987): 353. Further references to "'Lively' Memory and 'Past' Memory" (LMPM) will be made parenthetically within the text of this paper.

2. Johnson initially states the criterion of 'past' memory in terms of the power of the imagination to rearrange ideas and the lack of such a power in the memory (LMPM 345). It is the version I have stated, however, that is operative in his

argument that Hume rejected past memory. Cf. LMPM 346-347.

3. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), p. 85; quoted at LMPM p. 347. Further reference to the Treatise ('T') will be made parenthetically within the text of this paper, as will references to David Hume, Enquiries concerning the Human Understanding and concerning the Principles of Morals ('E'), ed. L.A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P.H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975).

4. I have argued elsewhere that the criterion of past memory is to be construed, in large part, as a causal thesis, i.e., that an idea of the memory singles out a particular impression that was the original cause of and closely resembles a particular positive idea. By construing the criterion of past memory as a causal thesis, it will adequately distinguish between genuine ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination, although one might never immediately know that an idea of the memory is a genuine idea of the memory. See "Hume on Memory and Causation," Hume Studies, 10th Anniversary Issue (1985): 171-172.

5. The 'criterion' of lively memory might yet be saved, although to do so one would need to show that 'force and vivacity' are general terms that denote distinct impressions of reflection that are peculiar to states of memory. Although Hume eventually might have held such a view, there is little evidence that it is found in the Treatise (cf. Daniel E. Flage, "Perchance to Dream: A Reply to Traiger," Hume Studies 11 (1985): 178-180). To discuss this issue in detail is beyond the scope of this paper.

6. If I am correct in this, the conditions Hume states in Treatise I.i.3 for drawing the distinction between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination are formal or metaphysical conditions, rather than epistemological conditions.

7. Or, as I would prefer to say, was originally caused by and represents a complex impression. See note 4.

8. If one appreciates Hume's scepticism or if the 'criteria' are merely formal criteria for distin-

guishing between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination (see note 6 above), the fact that one does not know at the time one is remembering that one's ideas of memory are true makes no difference.

9. As Johnson acknowledges, his handling of the case of the liar yields a number of paradoxes (LMPM 350-351; cf. 353). On my account these paradoxes disappear, since it is the liar's own repetition of his lies that is the source of his belief. This distinguishes the case of the liar from the simple case of mistaken memory. Nonetheless, the liar will "remember them, as realities" (T 86), and I shall comment below on what Hume seems to mean by 'realities' (cf. T 108).

10. The sole exception to this might be found in first-person reports of occurrent psychological states, but even here the claims would be limited to claims such as, "I now have an idea that is red." Here one's justification might be based upon a comparison between an occurrent idea and one's paradigm idea of a red thing. If the arguments I have advanced are sound, it is doubtful that one could claim to have knowledge of the <u>kind</u> of psychological state in which one presently finds oneself.