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Wayne Waxman

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Impressions and Ideas: Vivacity as Verisimilitude

Wayne Waxman

Hume's division of perceptions into ideas and impressions has been a source of considerable controversy. Opinions first diverge on the question of the *basis* of the distinction: is it the immediately detectable quality which Hume usually termed 'force and vivacity' (such that one could, in principle, distinguish impressions from ideas from the first moment of one's conscious life), or is it a feature that presupposes experience, comparison, and judgement. Although the latter view still finds supporters,¹ it conflicts with Hume's express and iterated statements to the contrary,² and so is tenable only as revisionism, not interpretation. Accordingly, the main focus of debate on this subject is on the nature of the quality of force and vivacity. In this paper, I shall propose and defend a definition of vivacity that, in my view, is most faithful to the spirit and letter of Hume's text, which fits best with the remainder of his philosophy, and best succeeds in resolving the numerous problems that have been raised by critics in connection with this notion.

My definition is this: vivacity, and its various cognates (force, firmness, strength, steadiness, etc.) all signify *verisimilitude*. By this I mean nothing more than what Hume said when he averred that,

This variety of terms, which may seem so unphilosophical, is intended only to express that act of the mind, which renders realities, or what is taken for such, more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination.³

In this passage, Hume's remarks were directed to the distinction between beliefs (vivid ideas) and mere conceptions ("perfect ideas"),⁴ and so presupposes the distinction between impressions and ideas. Nevertheless, his description seems to me to apply with at least equal force to impressions as to beliefs. Nor should it be overlooked that Hume explicitly equated the vivacity of impressions with belief: "the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the ... senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; ... To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses" (T 86). Since vivacity constitutes the belief which attends impressions, the difference

between impressions and ideas cannot be fundamentally distinct from that between lively ideas (convictions) and perfect ideas (fictions). Specifically, like believed ideas, it is the vivacity of impressions that renders them more *real* to us than fictions; and since their vivacity exceeds that of even the liveliest idea, impressions may be regarded as the *non plus ultra*, and so the standard, of reality among perceptions. Moreover, just as in the case of believed ideas,⁵ the verisimilitude of impressions is not, as so often is supposed, a quality of *the perceptions themselves* but of our *consciousness* of them: an intentional *regarding-as-real* which Hume, lacking this vocabulary (or perhaps desiring not to introduce new jargon), could only express by having “recourse to every one’s feeling” upon the occasion of “that *act of the mind*, which renders realities, or what is taken for such, more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination” (T 629, emphasis added).⁶ Human nature is such that when sensations and reflections “*strike upon the mind*, and make their way into *our thought or consciousness*” (T 1, emphasis added), we instinctively regard them as *actual presences*, as *there*. It is this (phenomenological) quality that renders even the dullest impression more “forcible and real” (T 631) than the clearest, most finely delineated, powerfully represented idea. It is this, too, that makes fire we see raging before us even more terrifying than the fire we merely infer from the sight of smoke filling the room. And it also explains what renders the chimeras of the madman so terrifying to him: his disordered nature permits some of his ideas actually to attain the perfect verisimilitude—the degree of presence and reality—which, in normal human beings, only sensations and reflections (passions, emotions, and desires) ever attain; he thus flees the mere thought of, say, a dragon, as if there were a dragon he was actually seeing. In other words, he has lost that vital function of human nature whereby thoughts are dampened (kept quiescent, wavering, and weak); and his images are thus able to impose themselves upon him with the same verisimilitude (fixity, steadfastness, strength, etc.) as actual sensation, and so do indeed *actually become* impressions.

The interpretation of vivacity as verisimilitude will for some be sure to recall James’ conception of belief, which may very well (wittingly or not) have been derived from Hume:

In the case of acquiescence or belief, the object is not only apprehended by the mind, but is held to have reality. Belief is thus the mental state or function of cognizing reality. ... In its inner nature, belief, or *the sense of reality*, is a sort of feeling more allied to the emotions than to anything else.⁷

After citing this in a projected book on epistemology, Russell objected as follows: "Is not the whole conception of 'existence' inapplicable to just the objects of which, we are most certain, namely those given in present acquaintance? And are not imagined objects also 'something', with a 'reality' of the kind appropriate to such objects?"⁸ Whether or not these questions represent genuine difficulties for James, it seems to me that, where Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas is concerned, Russell completely misses the point. For implicit in Hume's notion of vivacity, as I interpret it, is that the mere *presence* of a perception before consciousness does not suffice for us to *regard* it as real, *believe* in its real existence. The mere *presence before the mind* of a perception and the *belief* in its real existence are for him utterly distinct, and this seems to me no less true of our *regarding* sensations and reflections as *impressions* than our believing in the real existence of something we merely *think* (for example, fire) because it comes to mind in connection with an impression (for example, smoke filling the room) associated with it by constant conjunction (see T 86ff.). Before there can be belief in the existence of *any* perception, consciousness must respond to it with the *feeling* that it is real ("the ... quality, call it firmness, or solidity, or force, or vivacity, with which the *mind reflects upon it*, and is *assur'd of its present existence*" [T 106, emphasis added]). This feeling is grounded in human nature, and reflects its constitution just as surely as do sensations of colour, texture, and odour. In other words, just as we might have had different sensations than these had we been differently constituted, or have reacted to sound waves in the air by perceiving colours and shapes instead of pitches and timbres, so too we might have been constituted so as to lack the feeling of verisimilitude (possibly having some other in its stead), or to respond with this feeling to thoughts instead of to sensations and reflections. It is true that evolution probably would have soon done away with creatures that gave their thoughts the same weight we give to our sensations and emotions, and vice versa; but the point remains: for Hume, imagined objects (thoughts), albeit objects of acquaintance like sensations, will command such belief as our nature obliges us to attach to them.⁹

Construing vivacity as verisimilitude enables us to understand why having only the categories 'sensation', 'reflection', and 'thought' would have been insufficient for Hume's purposes, and a further dichotomization of perceptions as 'impressions' and 'ideas' was necessary. He had need of two axes of description: the first to represent the qualities proper to *perceptions themselves*, such as those which demarcate sensations from thoughts and both alike from reflections (or, more particularly: emotions from passions from desires; sounds from colours from odours; dream images from dream feelings from dream inferences; etc.); and the second to represent *phenomenological*

qualities of our *consciousness* of perceptions like vivacity/verisimilitude (also the felt ease of a customary transition of ideas).¹⁰ For vivacity, as he construed it, must be capable of varying independently of any and all changes in the perceptions themselves, that is, thoughts, sensations, and reflections may gain or lose vivacity/verisimilitude in any degree without thereby ceasing to *be* a thought or a sensation. Gains and losses of vivacity thus entail no change in our stock of perceptions—they merely alter the way we regard those we already have.¹¹ Among other things, the ability of the vivacity of a perception to vary independently¹² enabled Hume, on the one hand, to affirm a strict difference *in kind* between thoughts (memories, images, etc.) and sensations/reflections, and on the other hand, to treat their difference in vivacity as merely one of *degree*. In other words, without two axes of description of perceptions, he would have had no alternative but to assert that, when a thought gains in vivacity, it ceases to be a thought and becomes something intermediate between thought and sensation or reflection (rather than simply a more verisimilar thought).¹³ With vivacity an independent variable, however, a thought can be enlivened to the point where it *actually becomes* an impression (as in madness) *without thereby ceasing to be a thought*. Likewise, sensations and reflections may be weakened to the point of *actually becoming* ideas without ceasing thereby to be sensations or reflections (as when “our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas” [T 2]: for example, the effects of a strong sedative or when lapsing into a coma). For in both kinds of cases, only the *feeling* characteristic of our consciousness of the perception will have undergone any change. It is noteworthy, however, that, on either supposition, it is necessary to postulate some deformation of human nature. For the same nature that, in our present condition of wakefulness and health, determines us to regard some kinds of perception as more verisimilar than others, could, if different, cause us to regard them in different, even opposite, lights (for example, our natures might have been such that we feared the *image* of a charging rhino but were completely at ease with the *sensation*).

The principal presupposition of my interpretation of Hume’s conception of vivacity as verisimilitude is that there are directly discernible qualitative distinctions between thoughts and sensations at least as marked as those between visual and tactile sensation or between both and *passions* like love. Were this not the case, we could never distinguish between our present sensations and the thoughts we have *concurrently* with regard to them. For although, according to Hume, our thought of a sensation is in every way like the sensation (“a copy taken by the mind, which remains after the impression ceases” [T 8]), if there were no directly discernible quality of the perceptions

themselves, we should just take them to be the same, and so accord them the same degree of vivacity (that is, experience could never induce us to distinguish them). It is only if, despite their exact resemblance, they nevertheless differ qualitatively simply in virtue of being what we call a 'sensation' and what we call an 'image in thought', that we would not be able to react to the one (in accordance with the constitution of our nature) as an *impression* and to the other as an *idea*. In other words, a phenomenologically based dichotomization of perceptions into impressions and ideas entails directly discernible qualitative differences among perceptions (that is, *objects* present to consciousness) of a kind sufficient to enable us to distinguish them as *sensations, reflections, or thoughts*.¹⁴ Thus, for example, I must be no less aware of the qualitative difference between a cube I imagine or dream and one I actually see as between the cube I see and one I feel with my hand; nor can I mistake the thought-image of its red colouring for the red of the one I actually see—however poor the lighting ("The most lively thought is still inferior to the dullest sensation" [E 17]). Or, again, though the visual experience of a cellar in near pitch black is incomparably less intense and detailed than a minute-old memory of a brilliantly lit ballroom, the quality of the former as *sensation* (its *vivacity* aside) remains unmistakable; and *it is only as a consequence of this difference we directly discern* that the former perception is *felt* by consciousness in a more forceful (verisimilar) manner than the latter ("force ... is not to be measur'd by the apparent agitation of the mind" [T 631]). Similarly, if dreams and hallucinations are in fact thoughts and not sensations, then they, too, should be supposed to be recognized as such; it is only because of some dysfunction or impairment of our faculties, that they are *then* conceived with much—or even (as in the madman's case) the same—pitch of vivacity as actual sensations, and so confused with them (the assumption being that if one *could* summon up one's healthy, wakeful powers of consciousness, one would react differently to what is, after all, obviously a mere thought).

Ryle delivered what is perhaps the most trenchant criticism of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas as heretofore interpreted, and it is worth considering as an illustration of what happens if one fails to distinguish two axes of description in Hume:

Hume notoriously thought that there exist both 'impressions' and 'ideas', that is, both sensations and images; and he looked in vain for a clear boundary between the two sorts of 'perceptions'. Ideas, he thought, tend to be fainter than impressions, and in their genesis they are later than impressions, since they are traces, copies or reproductions of impressions. Yet he recognised that impressions can be of any

degree of faintness, and that though every idea is a copy, it does not arrive marked 'copy' or 'likeness', any more than impressions arise marked 'original' or 'sitter'. So, on Hume's showing, simple inspection cannot decide whether a perception is an impression or an idea.¹⁶

Ryle is quite right to say that impressions and ideas do not arrive marked 'original' and 'copy': this is the result of experience and association (see T 4f.). But I think it mistaken to infer from this that impressions cannot be distinguished from ideas by direct inspection: while inspection of the *perceptions themselves* cannot do so, inspection of the phenomenological feeling in our *consciousness* of them cannot fail to distinguish the impressions from the ideas: the feelings in the two cases are as discernibly different as the sensations of blue and red. I thus also disagree with Ryle's contention that,

the crucial difference remains between what is heard in conversation and what is 'heard' in day-dreams, between the snakes in the Zoo and the snakes 'seen' by the dipsomaniac, between the study that I am in and the nursery in which 'I might be now'. His mistake was to suppose that 'seeing' is a species of seeing, or that 'perception' is the name of a genus of which there are two species, namely impressions and ghosts or echoes of impressions. There are not such ghosts, and if there were, they would merely be extra impressions; and they would belong to seeing, not to 'seeing'.

In cases like these, the need to distinguish two axes of description is critical: 'seeing' and 'hearing' are indeed thoughts, discernibly different in quality from actual sensations of seeing and hearing; yet, in a deranged or otherwise dysfunctional mind, the former, without becoming *sensations*, may indeed become *impressions*, or the latter, without becoming *thoughts*, may indeed become *ideas*. In the absence of these distinctions, Hume would indeed have been confronted by the dilemma Ryle so well described:

Hume's attempt to distinguish between ideas and impressions by saying that the latter tend to be more lively than the former was one of two bad mistakes. Suppose, first, that 'lively' means 'vivid'. A person may picture vividly, but he cannot see vividly. One 'idea' may be more vivid than another 'idea', but impressions cannot be described as vivid at all, just as one doll can be more lifelike than another, but a baby cannot be lifelike or unlife-like. To say that the difference between babies and

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

dolls is that babies are more lifelike than dolls is an obvious absurdity. One actor may be more convincing than another actor; but a person who is not acting is neither convincing nor unconvincing, and cannot therefore be described as more convincing than an actor.

What Ryle overlooks is that it is not that some *perceptions* are somehow in their own right more lifelike than others but that *we*, in accordance with human nature, *consciously regard* certain of them as more so than others (sensations and reflections in preference to thoughts)—even though all alike are equally *present* to the mind. That is, like Russell, Ryle left no place for a distinction between the mere *presence* of something before the mind (that is, *appearance*) and our *sense* (feeling, belief) of its reality (whether the distinction is sustainable or not is another question, but the possibility of making it must be considered). So, too, the other horn of the dilemma:

Alternatively, if Hume was using 'vivid' to mean not 'lifelike' but 'intense', 'acute' or 'strong', then he was mistaken in the other direction; since, while sensations can be compared with other sensations as relatively intense, acute or strong, they cannot be so compared with images. When I fancy I am hearing a very loud noise I am not really hearing either a loud or a faint noise; I am not having a mild auditory sensation, as I am not having an auditory sensation at all, though I am fancying that I am having an intense one. An imagined shriek is not ear-splitting, nor yet is it a soothing murmur, and an imagined shriek is neither louder nor fainter than a heard murmur. It neither drowns it nor is drowned by it.

Once again, on the two axes reading, Hume has plenty of room to accommodate the qualitative difference *in kind* between sensing and thinking a sound, and the mere difference *in degree* between regarding the one as verisimilar in the highest degree (that is, an impression) and the other as having less verisimilitude (if a memory) or none at all (if a fiction). It should, therefore, be clear that the two axes of description reading not only has the strongest textual support but also is the most resistant to standard criticisms.

It is important not to confound the interpretation of vivacity offered here with that advanced by Kemp Smith. According to him, it is "impossible to interpret Hume—the seemingly explicit character of many of his statements notwithstanding—as asserting the difference to be one merely of degree in force and liveliness" because

impressions can be so faint as to be *confounded* with ideas, and ideas so vivid as to be *mistaken* for impressions. Were a difference of liveliness what really *constituted* the difference, the mistaking of images for impressions and *vice versa*, owing to variations in liveliness, could not occur. The difference being then *identified* with difference in liveliness, the lively would *as such* be impressions, and the less lively would *as such* be ideas.¹⁶

What is fundamental, in his view, is “that ideas are *exact* copies of impressions”: this he regarded as the true basis of their difference, despite his recognition that Hume expressly asserted the opposite (see T 2, 19, 319). Moreover, he recognized that the distinction among perceptions as copies and originals is *experiential* in nature; for, in thus removing the impression/idea dichotomy altogether from the purview of immediate consciousness, the vivacity imputed to impressions and ideas would indeed have to “be reinterpreted, and understood in a non-literal, indeed metaphorical sense.”¹⁷

Kemp Smith’s cavalier rejection of one of the cardinal tenets of Hume’s theory of ideas has had far-reaching (and, to my mind, deleterious) effects on subsequent interpretation of Hume, for it opened the way for him to advance a central thesis of the naturalistic interpretation of Hume—namely, that force and vivacity, strictly speaking, characterize only ideas, not impressions, so that their only legitimate application is to the distinction between belief and mere conception. By contrast, on my interpretation, nothing compels us to disregard Hume’s explicit and iterated claim that the only *essential* difference between impressions and ideas lies in their differing vivacity. For, so long as we recognize that their difference in vivacity relates not to the perceptions themselves but only to our consciousness of them, there is no difficulty explaining how ideas can be confounded with, or even become, impressions, and vice versa. The difference between the feelings characteristic of impression-consciousness and of idea-consciousness is just as great, and immediately evident, as that separating scarlet red from royal blue. Moreover, the distinction between impression and idea and that between conviction and conception are separated by no less great an order of magnitude than that demarcating a difference of colour from a mere difference in shade (of the same colour); indeed, rather than a difference of shade, it would be more correct to compare the difference between a belief and a perfect idea to a variation in the *brightness* of a single shade of colour. For, according to Hume, “any colour may acquire a new degree of liveliness or brightness without any other variation. But when you produce any other variation, ’tis no longer the same shade or colour” (T 96). The

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

same holds true of an idea: it, too, can increase in vivacity to the way to an unshakable conviction and then diminish again to a mere conception; yet, no matter how much it may change in liveliness, it neither ceases to be the same idea it was at the outset, nor a fortiori does it cease being an idea and become an impression. A change capable of making it a different idea corresponds to a change in the *shade* of colour; but nothing less than a change all the way from red to blue could equal the magnitude of that required to transform an idea into an impression (that is, a qualitative change no less momentous than—but *not the same as*—one capable of converting a thought into a sensation or reflection). For such a change is possible only in cases where human nature has been dramatically deformed or impaired (for example, when the madman treats thoughts as impressions, he is like the victim of jaundice who sees all objects coloured in various shades of yellow);¹⁸ and, insofar as Kemp Smith's interpretation holds any water at all, it is solely with respect to a human nature thus disordered. But this of course does nothing to negate or mitigate the stark, immediately evident difference between perceptions in the case of normal, fully functional individuals, which Hume marked by the terms 'impression' and 'idea'; and with respect to such individuals, if ever any difference among perceptions deserved to be deemed a difference *in kind*, it is surely the gulf in vivacity/verisimilitude between their impressions and their ideas.¹⁹

It might be objected that to understand Hume as I suggest conflicts with his teaching regarding sympathy. For unless, in saying that through sympathy "ideas become impressions," he merely meant that they are supplanted in us by an exactly resembling impression, this would be a case of the actual transformation of a mere *thought* (for example, of the anger felt by someone at an injustice inflicted upon another) into an actual *emotion* (one's own anger at that injustice). But surely this cannot be what he intended. In particular, it would wreak havoc with one of Hume's most fundamental principles (I give it together with its converse):

We have observ'd, that whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination. And we may here add, that these propositions are equally true in the *inverse*, and that whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different. (T 18)

Along with the equally important principle that all ideas are copied from impressions, there is no more important or frequently cited

principle in Hume's account of human understanding than this.²⁰ For, from it, it follows that nothing can "run the several different perceptions into one, and make them lose their characters of distinction and difference, which are essential to them" (T 259). Now, since I obviously am able, in imagination, to *separate* the mere *contemplation* of anger *in thought* from the actual *emotion* (*reflection*) itself, these have to be regarded as *distinct* perceptions. For, unless Hume were prepared to say that sympathy only *supplants* the idea of the emotion with an exactly resembling impression (that is, the actual emotion), he would undermine the whole basis of the claim, axiomatic to his system, that an impression and its resembling idea are distinct perceptions. For this claim rests on the prior, directly discernible difference between *thoughts*, on the one hand, and *sensations* and *reflections*, on the other; and unless he were prepared to countenance an alchemy capable of transforming the one (thoughts) into the other (sensations/reflections), he could not have wished us to construe his claim concerning sympathy with undue literalism.²¹ On the other hand, since the thought of the emotion as a perfect idea and the thought of the same emotion as, say, a memory, are both *thoughts*, here there is a genuine sense in which the one, as identical in content with the other, can be said to *become* the other. This, of course, would not be the case if vivacity were a feature of the perceptions themselves on a par with the qualitative difference that demarcates a reflection from a thought or a tactile sensation from a visual one; so, in fact, the case of sympathy serves to confirm the interpretation offered here.

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1. Kemp Smith is a leading example; see below.
2. "Impressions and ideas differ only in their strength and vivacity," and "The component parts of ideas and impressions are precisely alike. The manner and order of their appearance may be the same. The different degrees of their force and vivacity are, therefore, the only particulars, that distinguish them." David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 19 and 319 (hereafter cited as "T").
3. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 49 (hereafter cited as "E"); see also T 629.
4. Hume's expression for an idea with no vivacity at all on T 8 (though 'perfect idea' is used in a different sense on T 234).

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

5. The vivacity of belief "plainly makes no addition to our precedent ideas," it "can only change the *manner* of our conceiving them" (T 96).
6. Careful attention should be paid to the terms in which Hume spelled out what, in his view, are the only two possible positions regarding belief: "belief is some new idea, such as that of *reality* or *existence*, which we join to the simple conception of an object, or it is merely a peculiar *feeling* or *sentiment*" (T 623). In either case, it is clear that, for him, 'belief' means 'reality' or 'existence'.
7. William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2:283 (emphasis added). Cited from Russell (see n. 8).
8. Bertrand Russell, *The Theory of Knowledge*, vol. 7 of *Russell's Collected Papers* (London, 1987), 140f.
9. Even Wittgenstein seems to have recognized that there is a use of 'belief' of the kind exploited by Hume (however, unlike Hume's sense, Wittgenstein's is not merely manifested in behaviour, but rooted in it):

Imagine an observer who, as it were automatically, says what he is observing. Of course he hears himself talk, but, so to speak, he takes no notice of that. He sees that the enemy is approaching and reports it, describes it, but like a machine. What would that be like? Well, he does not act according to his observation. Of him, one might say that he speaks what he sees, but that he does not *believe* it. It does not, so to speak, get inside him. (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Remarks on the Philosophy of Psychology* [Chicago, 1980], vol. 1, sec. 813)

This is an appropriate occasion to remark that, on Hume's conception of belief, it does not seem possible for the paradox Wittgenstein ascribed to Moore to arise. See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (New York, 1958), pt. 2.10. The paradox can be illustrated by the statement, "This room is on fire and I don't believe it": although not a logical contradiction, it is nevertheless nonsensical, and so needs to be excluded by any account of the logic of belief. Now, in a Humean framework, the first part of the statement is only possible if there are *impressions* of a fire; however, the vivacity that makes them impressions also renders it impossible for one to disbelieve in the real existence of the fire (since belief just *is* vivacity). This, it should be noted, is not a *logical* impossibility; for we might have been so constituted that our sensations were not felt as impressions but as perfect ideas: in that case, although having sensations of approaching flames and searing heat, we would indeed *not* believe a fire was present. Thus,

it is only because human nature is the way it is that the paradox cannot arise.

10. The need for it, if not the distinction itself, is clearly foreshadowed in Locke:

I ask any one, Whether he be not invincibly conscious to himself of a different Perception, when he looks on the Sun by day, and thinks on it by night; when he actually tastes Wormwood, or smells a Rose, or only thinks on that Savour, or Odour? We as plainly find the difference there is between any *Idea* revived in our Minds by our own Memory, and actually coming into our Minds by our Senses, as we do between any two distinct *Ideas*. (John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* [Oxford, 1975], 4.2.14)

Since he seems to be referring to the differences noticed in the perceptions themselves ("conscious to himself of a *different perception*"), I am inclined to think his point concerns the first axis. At any rate, it seems quite probable that this, or some similar remark in Locke (more likely than Descartes' Sixth Meditation), struck a spark in Hume; it also may be the real meaning of the criticism of Locke's terminology on T 2n.

11. According to Flage,

Hume's attempt to distinguish impressions from ideas on the basis of the greater force and vivacity of an impressions *vis-à-vis* its corresponding idea failed, since he was quite willing to acknowledge that there are cases in which the force and vivacity of an impression and idea are indistinguishable. (Daniel E. Flage, *David Hume's Theory of Mind* [London, 1990], 168)

Flage's conclusion does not follow, however, if, as I maintain, Hume categorized perceptions along two axes (impression/belief/conception and sensation/reflection/thought). The mere fact that, in cases of mental dysfunction (for example, madness or sinking into unconsciousness), a thought can take on the status of an impression or a sensation that of an idea, hardly counts as a "failure." On the contrary, in my view, it serves instead to highlight the independent variability that gives Hume's categorization of perceptions its strength. Laird, too, seems to me to be mistaking a silk purse for a sow's ear when he asserts, on the ground that "dreamers do normally accept dream-manifestations as 'realities' *during their dreams*," that

if dream-manifestations are mere 'ideas', Hume's theory falls. ... [T]he reason why we all learn to dismiss dream-memories so very promptly from waking life, is largely, if

IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS

not principally, their lack of interconnexion, *inter se* and with waking life, rather than any lack of apparently intrinsic 'reality'. (John Laird, *Hume's Philosophy of Human Nature* [London, 1932; reprint, Hamden, Conn., 1967], 114f)

Hume, as I interpret him, could reply that the ultimate criterion by which we distinguish dream experience from wakeful, that presupposed by every other, is the directly discernible difference between sensations and thought-images. In this connection, Laird neglects to mention that, during sleep, not only are our faculties not in their normal working order (that is, sleep is a state of dysfunction akin to that of someone passing into a coma, whose sensations and reflections are losing their feeling of "reality"), but there are no sensations with which to compare and contrast thought-images; hence, it is not surprising that ideas of sensation, as the most vivid perceptions before the sleeping mind, are apt to be regarded as real by default (there being no real sensations to cast their shadow over them). Of course, if by "reality" Laird meant specifically *physical reality*, then one would indeed have to take into account the qualities of constancy and coherence (see T 194ff.); but such reality would not be possible in the first place if there were not some immediately perceptible feature in our consciousness of perception itself that leads us to regard sensations and reflections as real in a way that thought-images of them can never be.

12. Only the variability of vivacity *vis-à-vis* the perception itself is wholly independent; the perception can vary only slightly without ceasing to be (qualitatively) the same. For example, "A particular shade of any colour may acquire a new degree of liveliness or brightness without any other variation. But when you produce any other variation, 'tis no longer the same shade or colour" (T 96).
13. Hume did sometimes speak of a perception as "somewhat intermediate betwixt an impression and an idea" (T 8); but he never, to my knowledge, referred to any as intermediate between thought and sensation.
14. Thus, we must not take too literally Hume's reference to "the great resemblance betwixt our impressions and ideas in every other particular, except their degree of force and vivacity" (T 2).
15. This, and the citations to follow are from Gilbert Ryle, *The Concept of Mind* (New York, 1949), 249-50.
16. Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941), 210.
17. *Ibid.*, 211.

18. One can easily imagine losing the ability to see colours other than yellow; but if one can see yellow, it is difficult to think that one would be unable to see more than one shade of it and impossible to think one could not see more than one degree of "liveliness or brightness" of the same shade. The same holds for the difference in vivacity between impressions and ideas and that between convictions and fictions: one might be conscious only of impressions or only of ideas, and so be entirely unable to conceive the other; but could one be conscious of both and still be unable to conceive a greater or lesser degree of certainty with respect to one and the same idea? I think not.
19. My interpretation of force and vivacity has closest affinity to Flage's (above, n. 11): "I argue that (a) given Hume's general principles, it is unintelligible to claim that 'force and vivacity' are perceivable characteristics of impressions and ideas *as such*, and (b) that although the Hume of the *Treatise* generally treated force and vivacity as characteristics of perceptions as such, there is some evidence that the Hume of the first *Enquiry* took force and vivacity to be impressions of reflection" (p. 168). Though I concur fully with (a), I believe I have offered sufficient evidence from the *Treatise* to cast serious doubt on (b).
20. It falls directly out of Hume's conception of a perception as that which is everything it appears to be and appears to be just what it is (see T 190).
21. It might be supposed that there is another way in which the principle that separability in imagination implies real distinctness argues against a literal construal of the sympathy doctrine. The latter supposes that an idea of an emotion is *succeeded* by an impression of it; and since successive perceptions are necessarily distinct perceptions (that is, they can be separated in imagination by supposing one to occur and the other not), the separability principle implies that the idea and the impression must be distinct perceptions. But this argument cannot work. Instead of being directed towards the identity of the *content* of the perceptions (emotion and thought of the emotion), it relates only to the question of their *numerical* identity. Numerical identity is not here at issue; for Hume would never think of denying that the perfect idea of a thing and the same idea believed at a later time are numerically different. For him, they are nevertheless *qualitatively* identical, the same thought-*content*. The issue here is whether the content of the idea of an emotion and that of the impression of the emotion are qualitatively the same; and the answer is no: a thought and a reflection are qualitatively discernible quite independently of their difference in vivacity.