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Another Look at Flage's Hume

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In recent articles, Daniel Flage (1985a, 1985b) offers an interpretation of Humean memory-ideas as relative ideas: ideas of memory are analogous to definite descriptions insofar as they single out exactly one entity.¹ Consequently, Flage argues that Hume has provided an adequate distinction between ideas generated by memory and ideas generated by imagination. It is my contention that Flage's reading is neither consonant with Hume's remarks in the *Treatise* nor successful in reducing the number of difficulties with Hume's theory of memory. I shall argue that (1) it is not clear that all memory-ideas are complex (an assumption necessary for Flage's interpretation); (2) Flage construes all memory as episodic, but he overlooks semantic memory; and (3) there is a distinction between mis-remembering and imagining which Flage's account cannot accommodate.

It is worth noting that Flage contends that he is giving an interpretation of *Hume's* account of memory; he is not simply attempting to find out the truth of the matter. That is, Flage's position is that there is good reason to think that Hume construed memory-ideas as relative ideas. Accordingly, Flage must provide evidence, preferably textual, for the claim that Hume held such a view. My position is that it is unlikely that Hume held such a view, and even if he did, it is inadequate for grounding an external distinction between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas. In short, claiming that Hume was interested in a decisive distinction between ideas of memory and ideas of imagination is to involve Hume in problems with which he was not concerned. Not only are Flage's remarks in conflict with Hume's, but if we read him as Flage suggests, Hume's theory of memory becomes considerably more riddled with problems than it is if we do not so read him.

Flage and Hume

In section 1 of *Treatise* 1.1, Hume draws his celebrated distinction between ideas and impressions. In the second section he considers impressions in some detail and he does the same for ideas in section three. Following every impression, Hume claims, there is a corresponding idea, either produced by the faculty of memory or the faculty of imagination. He takes it as no less than obvious that memory-ideas are more "lively and strong" than imagination-ideas:

'Tis evident at first sight, that the ideas of the memory are much more lively and strong than those of the imagination, and that the former faculty paints its objects in more distinct colours, than any which are employ'd by the latter.²

That memory-ideas are more lively than their counterparts in imagination Hume construes as a *sensible* difference between the two. Accordingly, I shall refer to this difference as the internal difference.

There is, however, another difference between these kinds of ideas, namely, that memory-ideas preserve the order and form of their corresponding simple ideas, while imagination-ideas need not:

'Tis evident, that the memory preserves the original form, in which its objects were presented, and that where-ever we depart from it in recollecting any thing, it proceeds from some defect or imperfection in that faculty. ... The chief exercise of the memory is not to preserve the simple ideas, but their order and position. ...

The same evidence follows us in our second principle, of *the liberty of the imagination to transpose and change its ideas*. (T 9-10)

I shall refer to the above as the external difference between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas.³

During his discussion of causation, Hume elaborates on the above differences. The external difference, he claims, "is not sufficient to ... 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). He concludes that the difference between memory and imagination is simply that memory-ideas are more forceful and vivacious than imagination-ideas. In short, since the external difference is non-phenomenal, it is inadequate for distinguishing, in practice, between ideas that are the product of memory and ideas that are the product of the imagination.

Before concluding his discussion of the above differences Hume voices a note of scepticism concerning the internal difference. He argues that the internal difference generally holds between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas; however, there is room for error. Occasionally memory fails us; that is, the ideas of memory lose their force and vivacity and are mistaken for ideas of the imagination. Similarly, an idea of the imagination may "acquire such a force and vivacity, as to pass for an idea of the memory" as in the case of a liar who begins to believe his lies (T 86). Nonetheless, it is belief, Hume concludes, that marks the internal (or what he calls sensible) difference between

memory-ideas and imagination-ideas, belief being no more than a lively idea.

Flage contends that even though the internal difference between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas is sometimes unreliable, Hume does provide a decisive distinction between the two; and it is a distinction which is grounded in the external difference. That is, since a memory-idea, unlike an imagination idea, preserves the order and form of its corresponding simple ideas, a memory-idea has a common causal ancestry, that is, its history can be traced back to a particular complex impression. Now in light of this, and Hume's claim that we are unable to discern genuine ideas of memory with certainty in practice, Flage suggests that we are to think of memory ideas as relative ideas.⁴

A relative idea is a non-pictorial complex idea; it consists of a positive idea (mental image), and relations which hold between the positive idea and that of which we have a relative idea. A relative idea "singles out an unperceived entity on the basis of its relations to a perceived entity, *i.e.*, a positive idea" (Flage 1981, 56). Relative ideas, then, are the "cognitive analogues of definite descriptions" (*ibid.*, 55); like definite descriptions which *linguistically* pick out entities, relative ideas *cognitively* single out entities.

In the case of memory-ideas, the unperceived entity is the original complex impression and the relation is that of causation. So conceived, Flage concludes that

Hume's ideas of the memory are relative ideas corresponding to definite descriptions of the general form, "the complex impression that is the (original) cause of a particular positive idea *m* and which exactly (or closely) resembles *m*," where '*m*' is a variable ranging over positive ideas (mental images). (1985a, 168)

More precisely, Flage argues that "*a positive idea is a complex idea of the memory if and only if, as a complex idea, it was caused by and resembles a particular complex impression*" (1985a, 172-73; emphasis added).

Cases of remembering one's dreams and imaginations are a bit different according to Flage:

in the case of remembering a dream, one's relative idea would correspond to the definite description of the general form, "the 'feeling' (impression of reflection) that was associated with some complex idea *d*₁ and is the cause of a positive idea *f* that is associated with a positive idea *d*₂, and *d*₂ exactly or closely resembles *d*₁." (1985b, 180)

Flage claims that “simple ideas are those ‘parts’ of a complex idea that are neither distinguishable nor separable” (1990, 40). He further contends that “since Hume took it to be impossible to be aware of a simple idea except as a component of a complex idea, he was committed to holding that it is impossible to remember a simple idea except as a component of a complex idea” (1985b, 178). In short, it is impossible to have an idea of a quality—for example, red—apart from all other ideas; therefore, it is impossible to remember such an idea. Hume’s simple ideas, according to Flage, are “nothing more than the respects in which complex ideas are similar” (*ibid.*, 177).

The text

The notion of simple ideas is admittedly a curious one, as Flage rightly points out. For what does it mean to say that we have, for example, an idea of red? Given Hume’s characterization of ideas as images, it seems highly implausible that we could form an image of red alone—we seem only to be able to form images of red *things*. Flage does not deny that red is a simple idea. Rather, he argues that Hume thought it impossible to have an idea of red apart from any other ideas, presumably because there are no ‘purely simple’ impressions (see Flage 1985b, 176-78). Yet Hume provides an example of a simple impression in his discussion of space and time. Neither ideas nor impressions, Hume contends, are infinitely divisible; there are visible and tangible minima. In support of this claim, Hume cites the ‘ink spot experiment’:

Put a spot of ink upon paper, and retire to such a distance, that the spot becomes altogether invisible; you will find, that upon your return and nearer approach the spot first becomes visible by short intervals; and afterwards becomes always visible; and afterwards acquires only a new force in its colouring without augmenting its bulk; and afterwards, when it has encreas’d to such a degree as to be really extended, ’tis still difficult for the imagination to break it into its component parts, because of the uneasiness it finds in the conception of such a minute object as a single point. (T 42)

Such coloured, unextended points, which are Hume’s visible simples, are examples of simple impressions. They have no extension and hence no shape: “A point [is defined] to be what has neither length, breadth nor depth” (T 42). Since we can have such a simple impression, we can also remember it.⁵ In addition, Hume often speaks of simple ideas as simple, that is, not as part of other ideas. For example, “That idea of red, which we form in the dark” (T 3).

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It seems clear that Hume thinks that in the above experiment, all that is present in one's visual field is the spot of ink. Flage disagrees. He writes:

the doctrine of minimum sensibles would seem to allow that one can form an idea of an unextended point of color. This does not entail, however, that one can form a geometrically simple idea of a particular color in isolation from all other ideas of color points, for Hume's example of seeing a minimum visible indicates that minimum visibles are "seen" only within the context of a spatially and *qualitatively complex impression*. (1985b, 176-77; emphasis added)

It is not at all clear what Flage means by "qualitatively complex." He might mean (1) the ink spot has more than one quality, or (2) the visual field counts as an impression. Now (1) is clearly false: the spot is colored but has no extension; and (2) is not consonant with Hume's account of impressions. Hume, in his discussion of the vacuum, speaks of a point of light surrounded by darkness (T 55-56). But darkness is not a positive idea! "A man, who enjoys his sight, receives no other perception from turning his eyes on every side, when entirely depriv'd of light, than what is common to him with one born blind; and 'tis certain such-a-one has no idea either of light or darkness" (T 55-56). Clearly, in this example, there is nothing but the light in the visual field. Moreover, even if the visual field were to count as an impression, all impressions are distinct for Hume, and so the spot of ink is separable from all else in the visual field: "So far from there being any distinct impression, attending every impression and every idea, that I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd" (T 66); and, "Every thing, that is different, is distinguishable; and every thing, that is distinguishable, may be separated" (T 36). If one can so separate impressions, I see no reason why he cannot remember it as separated.

Given the above examples, it seems unlikely that Hume means to construe all memory ideas as relative ideas. Simple memory-ideas do not fit into Flage's characterization of memory-ideas, since relative ideas are "inherently" complex. Simple ideas have no order and form; their causal ancestry cannot be traced back to a particular complex impression.

Flage's account of remembering dreams also runs counter to Hume's remarks in the *Treatise*. Flage holds that

in the case of remembering a dream, one's relative idea would correspond to the definite description of the general form, "the

'feeling' (impression of reflection) that was associated with some complex idea d_1 and is the cause of a positive idea f that is associated with a positive idea d_2 , and d_2 exactly or closely resembles d_1 ." (1985b, 180)

That is, dreaming is an "operation of the mind" and is therefore accompanied by particular internal impressions. This feeling or impression of reflection which accompanies dreams is "part of what is remembered in remembering a dream" (1985b, 180). So, according to Flage, when we remember a dream, we have a positive idea of this "dream feeling" (f) and a positive idea of the content of the dream (d_2).

In claiming that the feeling of dreaming is an impression of reflection, Flage strays from Hume's account of impressions of reflection. Hume explains the distinction between impressions of sensation and impressions of reflection as follows: "impressions of reflexion are only antecedent to their correspondent ideas; *but posterior to those of sensation, and deriv'd from them*" (T 8, emphasis added). For example, suppose I have an impression which makes me hungry. After the impression ceases, an idea of it remains and when I recall this idea (reflect later on it), new impressions are generated from it; for example, frustration for not having the time to eat. Now, this frustration is an impression of reflection from which ideas are generated. The important points, however, are that (a) impressions of reflection proceed and are derived from impressions of sensation, and (b) impressions of reflection are the result of reflecting upon ideas produced by impressions of sensation (they involve reflection and memory).

What is curious about Flage's argument is that he appears to overlook these features of impressions of reflection. If the feeling associated with a dream state is an impression of reflection as Flage argues, then it was derived from an impression of sensation which in turn caused an idea. This idea, when later recalled, produced the impression of reflection, that is, the "dream feeling." This is vastly different than the account Flage gives us. He argues that the feeling (impression of reflection) "that accompanies dreams" singles out a dream state, but he neglects to account for all that is required prior to the putative impression of reflection in order for it to be so called. Quite simply, Hume gives an account in which ideas of sensation are *prior to* impressions of reflection; Flage gives an account in which they are *simultaneous*.⁶ Humean impressions of reflection presuppose memory. They cannot, therefore, be used to explain the memory process in the way Flage would like us to think.

Finally, it is not unreasonable to ask what evidence there is that Hume (a) means to construe memory-ideas as relative ideas, and (b) intends to draw a decisive distinction between memory-ideas and

imagination-ideas. Let's begin with the first point. I am quite willing to grant that Hume was aware (and made use of) the distinction between positive ideas and relative ideas. In his discussion of existence, Hume even suggests that we have relative ideas of external objects (T 68). Yet there is no suggestion in any of his remarks on memory that memory-ideas are relative ideas. In light of this, it seems gratuitous to argue that Hume conceived them in this way. It is odd to suggest that Hume espoused such an elaborate theory of memory-ideas when he makes *no mention of it*. Secondly, as I remarked above, the claim that memory-ideas are relative ideas runs counter to several of Hume's remarks in the early sections of the *Treatise*. Lastly, it is not clear that Hume is interested in focusing on the external difference between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas in distinguishing the two decisively (see T 85). Certainly he has claimed that there is an external difference between them: ideas of memory preserve the order and form of their simple ideas while imagination-ideas do not. Yet Hume brings up the external difference and immediately dismisses it; it is secondary to the point at hand, that is, locating an internal difference. In short, *it is far from clear that Hume is claiming that preserving the order and form constitutes a necessary and sufficient condition for memory-ideas*.

The distinction

Flage, then, has overlooked several of Hume's fundamental remarks in the *Treatise*. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, there is another difficulty with Flage's account of memory; namely, he has not located a decisive distinction between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas. In addition to 'purely simple' memory-ideas, there are other memory-ideas which do not fit into Flage's account at all. Let's first consider Flage's account of dreams and then consider his general account of memory-ideas.

Suppose that I remember seeing a book in the library, but in fact I only dreamt that I saw a book in the library. Now, on Flage's account, since I have no positive idea of the "dream feeling," my memory of my dream is not genuine. Since it is a memory of a dream, and therefore there is no corresponding impression by which it was caused and which it resembles, my memory of the book does not count as a memory-idea on Flage's original account either. But why shouldn't this memory count as a genuine memory-idea? In short, why must being aware that we were dreaming count as a necessary condition for remembering our dreams?

In addition, Flage's account of the distinction between memory-ideas and imagination-ideas overlooks a distinction between misremembering and imagining. Recall that "a positive idea is a complex idea of the memory if and only if, as a *complex* idea, it was caused by and resembles a particular complex impression" (Flage 1985a, 172-73).

Now, in expounding his view, Flage explains that he uses “the locution ‘exactly (or closely)’ since there clearly are cases in which one remembers some event, but not all the details of the event. In such a case, the positive idea of the memory only closely resembles the impression” (1990, 59 n. 15). Presumably then, even if some details are left out of a memory, so long as it fulfils all the other conditions, the memory-idea is still genuine.

Flage also considers nonmnemonic beliefs, that is, “beliefs regarding spatially and temporally located objects that are not based upon the memory” (1985a, 168). For example, assuming that I have never been to Rome, my belief that there is a city called Rome situated somewhere in Italy is a nonmnemonic belief because I am not remembering Rome. Rather, I form the idea of Rome based on various impressions; for example, reading about Rome in a book and/or being told of Rome by a friend who has been there. Nonmnemonic beliefs are relative ideas which “correspond to definite descriptions of the general form: ‘the state of affairs that is not a perception, that resembles *i*, that is located at *p* and/or that occurs at *t*’, where *i* is a positive idea, *p* is a place, and *t* is a time (or temporal property)” (Flage 1985a, 176).

Now consider the following scenario: I remember sitting at a table last year at my birthday wearing a navy blue dress, my brother to my left, my sister at my right, and my mother, wearing a white dress, sitting across the table holding a book. Now, suppose I am correct in my memory of every detail save for the fact that my mother did not have a book in her hand. On Flage’s account this memory will not count as a genuine memory-idea, for I have not omitted a detail but rather added one which was not true to the original impression. Since as a complex idea my memory can be traced back to a particular complex impression which it was caused by, but not one which it “closely resembles,” my idea is either an imagination-idea or a nonmnemonic belief. But do we want to say that I am not remembering a scene at my birthday? Perhaps I am mis-remembering a scene, but I am certainly not imagining it. That is, mis-remembering is a species of remembering; it is not a species of imagination.⁷ Moreover, my memory of my birthday above is not a nonmnemonic belief since its causal ancestry can be traced back to a complex impression (and also because it is based on memory).

The problem amounts to this: Flage appears to take memory-ideas, nonmnemonic beliefs and imagination-ideas as mutually exclusive and mutually exhaustive. That is, if an idea can be traced back to a particular complex impression which it was caused by and resembles, it is an idea of memory; if not, it is either an idea of imagination or a nonmnemonic belief. If it engenders belief, it is a nonmnemonic belief, if not, it is an idea of imagination. Yet there are certainly cases which

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do not fall squarely into any of these categories. Flage's interpretation cannot accommodate all the varying degrees of memory.

Flage's account of memory-ideas also overlooks semantic memory, for example, memory of facts. For example, suppose I remember that I have my birthday at the same restaurant every year. Where does this fit into Flage's account? Clearly, it is not an idea of memory since its causal ancestry cannot be traced back to a *particular* complex impression; yet it is certainly a genuine memory. The complex impression from, say, my 1986 birthday is not the cause of my memory since it cannot account for my memory that *every* birthday was at the same restaurant; it can account only for one. The same holds for the complex impressions from all the other birthday parties as well. Although they are each necessary for being the cause of my memory, they are only jointly sufficient. However, we cannot say then that my memory can be traced back to a *particular* corresponding impression. On Flage's account then, this type of memory is much more like an imagination-idea than a memory-idea.

The heart of the problem is that Flage's interpretation rests on a motivation that Hume does not share. There are cases where, as a matter of practice, one cannot distinguish with any degree of certainty between memory and imagination. Hume is aware of this and accordingly does not pretend that either the internal or the external criterion is decisive and infallible. Flage's attempt to find in Hume just such a criterion is, therefore, dubious on purely textual grounds and, furthermore, has the undesirable consequence of generating more problems than it solves. Since Hume surely has enough genuine problems of his own, offering an interpretation that manages to increase, not reduce, the difficulties is, to say the least, not an act of charity.

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1. Note that ideas of memory single out one complex set of entities.
2. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 9 (hereafter cited as "T").
3. Note that Flage refers to what I have named the internal and external differences as the phenomenal criterion and formal criterion respectively. For reasons that will emerge later, I am avoiding the use of "criterion."
4. Flage also gives other support for construing memory-ideas as relative ideas, viz. Hume's view of memory-ideas as representatives.

5. In support of the claim that there are simple memory-ideas, note also that Saul Traiger (1985) points out section 2 of the *Enquiry* where Hume gives an example of a simple memory-idea: "Every one 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 this sensation" (p. 169).
6. It is not clear (1) why Flage thinks that the impression of reflection (dream feeling) is *associated* with the complex idea d_1 , or (2) what warrants his move from claiming that dream feelings *accompany* dreams to saying that they are *associated* with dreams.
7. Even Flage would be hard pressed to deny this, since my memory in the example fulfils all his conditions except for one, viz. that it does not "closely resemble" its corresponding complex impression. That is, even on Flage's account my example is much closer to a memory-idea than an imagination-idea. I suspect that Flage would respond that the locution "closely resembles" is meant to include examples such as mine, however, it is not clear that this constitutes an adequate solution. That is, there are cases of mis-remembering in which we add details, yet if we add too many details or alter a significant detail, the result is an imagination-idea. Flage needs to clarify the locution "closely resembles" so as to include the former and exclude the latter, and it is not at all clear how (or if) this is possible.

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