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# On Friedman's Look

*Daniel E. Flage*

In a pair of articles and a book (Flage 1985a, 1985b, 1990), I argued that Hume's ideas of memory are relative ideas. In "Another Look at Flage's Hume" (this volume), Lesley Friedman challenges my account on four points. She argues (1) that it is possible to remember simple ideas in their simplicity; (2) that I have misrepresented Humean impressions of reflection; (3) that I have overlooked the importance of force and vivacity in Hume's account of memory; and (4) that there is no textual evidence for claiming that Humean ideas of memory are relative ideas. In addition, she contends that my interpretation cannot account for mis-remembering. In this paper I show that some of the problems Friedman finds with my interpretation arise from my reading of Lockean distinctions into the *Treatise* while others stem from my conflation of distinctions drawn in the first *Enquiry* with comparable distinctions in the *Treatise*.

## 1. Remembering simple ideas

My argument that Humean ideas of memory are relative ideas is based primarily on Hume's remarks in three passages. In *Treatise* 1.1.3, one finds this: "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."<sup>1</sup> Later in the same passage one finds this:

"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 memory is not to preserve the simple ideas, but their order and position. (T 9)

And in *Treatise* 1.3.5, one finds this:

These faculties [memory and imagination] are as little distinguish'd from each other by the arrangement of their complex ideas. 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)

This is only one characteristic of ideas of memory, the other being the greater degree of “force and vivacity” in an idea of the memory *vis-à-vis* an idea of the imagination (T 9, 85). I call this characteristic the formal criterion (Flage 1985a, 171); Friedman calls it the external difference (p. 178). These passages show that ideas of the memory represent earlier impressions, or ideas, or “events,” or things known.<sup>2</sup> How do they do so? Given the remarks on the preservation of “order and form” and “order and position,” and given that resemblance alone is not sufficient to distinguish nonmnemonic ideas from mnemonic ideas (see T 9), I argued that there is an implicit causal thesis: an idea of memory singles out the impression that was its original cause. It is a relative idea corresponding to a definite description of the form,

“the impression that is the (original) cause of and exactly (or closely) resembles *m*,” where ‘*m*’ denotes a particular positive idea. (Flage 1985a, 172)<sup>3</sup>

If my account of memory is correct, there is a positive idea (“mental image”) that provides the basis for every relative idea of memory. Further, this positive idea must be complex.

Friedman objects (pp. 180-81) that insofar as my account requires that there be a complex positive idea that provides the basis for one’s relative idea of memory, this conflicts with several passages in the *Treatise*. She cites the ink spot experiment (T 42) as showing that one can have a simple impression of colour. She remarks, “Since we can have such a simple impression, we can also remember it” (p. 180), adding, “It seems clear that Hume thinks that in the [ink spot] experiment, all that is present in one’s visual field is the spot of ink” (*ibid.*). Since I had argued that “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” (Flage 1985b, 176-77), she questions my use of ‘qualitatively complex’ in that context. She correctly acknowledges the spot itself can have no characteristics other than being a determinate shade of colour, and then argues that my contention that “the visual field counts as an impression ... is not consonant with Hume’s account of impressions” (p. 181). She writes:

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. (p. 181)

Does the ink spot experiment show that an indivisible colour point is the only thing present in one's visual field? No. If I follow Hume's lead and place a spot of red ink on the blue wall of my office, how do I notice the spot? The wall and the spot are qualitatively distinct: the wall is blue and the spot is red. If there were no qualitative difference between the spot and the wall, I could not see the spot.<sup>4</sup> Is the spot the only thing in my visual field? It would seem not: I see the spot against the background of the wall. Hence, it would seem that if I remember perceiving the indivisible spot, I can remember it only against the background of the qualitatively contrasting wall. While I grant that Hume claims there are indivisible and qualitatively simple colour points, I find it implausible to suggest that one can either perceive or remember the point as a point apart from a "visual" background; that is, the passage does not seem to warrant the claim that "all that is present in one's visual field is the spot of ink" (Friedman, p. 180).

Nor does the passage she cites at T 55-56 show my account "is not consonant with Hume's account of impressions" (p. 181). Granted, Hume denies that the idea of darkness is a "positive idea," but one must distinguish between two senses of the expression 'positive idea': in one sense there is a contrast between a positive idea ("mental image") and a relative idea; in the other sense there is a contrast between a positive and a negative idea. In the passage under consideration, Hume was concerned with a "positive idea" in the second sense. On the other hand, it is clear that *Locke* used the term 'positive idea' in the first sense when he wrote:

Thus the *Idea* of Heat and Cold, Light and Darkness, White and Black, Motion and Rest, are equally clear and *positive Ideas* in the Mind; though, perhaps, some of *the causes* which produce them, are barely *privations* in those Subjects, from whence our Senses derive those *Ideas*.<sup>5</sup>

As far as I know, Hume never used 'positive idea' in the first sense; he simply called such ideas "ideas." I introduced *Locke's* nomenclature to provide a term for a nonrelative idea.<sup>6</sup> Hence, the question becomes,

does a sighted-person in the dark have any positive perceptions? The passage Friedman cites shows that the sighted-person *does* have an idea of darkness. Notice that the sighted-person sitting in the dark “receives *no other* perception ... than what is common to him with one born blind” (T 55-56, emphasis added). To claim he or she had “no other” perception than is common to the person born blind, implies that the sighted-person sitting in the dark has an impression or impressions, namely, an impression of darkness. Should there be any question about my reading, notice that at the end of the paragraph from which this sentence is taken Hume affirms that one has an idea of darkness: “the idea of utter darkness can never be the same with that of vacuum” (T 56).<sup>7</sup>

Friedman raises a final point in defence of her claim that one can have simple ideas of memory. Citing Hume’s discussions of difference, distinguishability, and separability (T 36, 66), she writes:

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. ... If one can so separate impressions, I see no reason why he cannot remember it as separated. (p. 181)

In allowing the possibility that the visual field counts as an impression, it must be a complex impression, that is, an impression that is composed of indefinitely many colour points. In this respect it is analogous to a pointillist painting or, to use a more contemporary example, a computer array composed of pixels. Hume’s use of the separability principle is interesting. While in the passage Friedman cites (T 36), Hume might seem to suggest that what is different is distinguishable and what is distinguishable is separable *simpliciter*, in an earlier passage he noted that “whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable *by the thought and imagination*” (T 18, emphasis added). This implies *at least* that if an idea of redness is a simple idea, one can imaginatively “transpose” the redness of an idea of one object to some other object (see Flage 1990, 41-42). Does it also imply, as Friedman suggests, that if a colour point is a simple idea then one can separate it from its visual field, that is, literally remove it from the field and consider it in isolation from *any* visual field?

To answer this question, consider a visual field consisting of two black colour points on a white background, something like the following:



The two black spots are different. Therefore, they are distinguishable. Therefore, they are separable in the thought and imagination. How does one distinguish them? One is the spot on the right side of the field, the other is the spot on the left side of the field.<sup>8</sup> Such a distinction indicates that we have at least separated them in thought. Does this imply that one can separate the spots from the visual field in Friedman's sense of literally withdrawing them from a spatial context? No. Since Hume holds that "whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different" (T 18), we may ask how two Friedmanesque spots are distinguishable? One cannot appeal to qualitative differences, for the spots are qualitatively identical: they are two unextended points of black colour. One cannot introduce them into some other spatial context, since, by hypothesis, they are withdrawn from any spatial context. One cannot claim they are numerically distinct, since it is on the ground of distinguishability that one can claim numerical difference. Whence the difference?

Thus, if one acknowledges that all the impressions qua colour points composing a visual field are numerically different, I grant that one can distinguish one point from the others, but such a distinction is only relative to other colour points in the field (or the boundaries of the field). But if one can only distinguish the two spots from one another and separate them in thought relative to a visual field, I see no reason why the positive idea providing the basis for one's memory of such a coloured spot is any less complex.

## 2. Dreams, impressions of reflection, and force and vivacity

In "Flage on Hume's Account of Memory," Saul Traiger shows that my original account of one's relative ideas of memory is insufficient to account for memories of dreams.<sup>9</sup> In reply, I argued that a dream state is accompanied by a peculiar internal impression, and that one's relative idea would correspond to the definite description,

"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  $d_1$ ." (Flage 1985b, 180).

Friedman cites Hume's initial remark on impressions of reflection, that "impressions of reflexion are only antecedent to their correspondent

ideas; but posterior to those of sensation, and deriv'd from them" (T 8; see also T 275), and argues that since impressions of sensation are antecedent to impressions of reflection, "impressions of reflection are the result of reflecting upon ideas produced by impressions of sensation (they involve reflection and memory)" (p. 182). On this point I believe she is correct: as the Hume of the *Treatise* uses the expression 'impression of reflection', such an impression cannot accompany a dream state, and therefore an idea of reflection cannot be used to distinguish a memory of a dream state from a memory of some other psychological state. To concede this, however, does not constitute a rejection of my contention that ideas of memory in general, and ideas of memories of dreams in particular, are relative ideas.

One faces the following problem. If his account of memory can claim anything close to adequacy, Hume must provide an account of one's memories of previous psychological states: one should be able to distinguish remembering previous perceptual states from remembering dreams from remembering imaginings from remembering judgments, etc.<sup>10</sup> One might plausibly cite *Lockean* ideas of reflection as a basis for distinguishing among psychological states,<sup>11</sup> but, as Friedman has shown, Humean impressions of reflection do not function in the same way as their Lockean nominal counterparts. This suggests that the Hume of the *Treatise* does not provide an adequate basis for distinguishing among psychological states: even if degrees of force and vivacity were an adequate basis for distinguishing among occurrent psychological states, it is not at all clear how such considerations could play a role in distinguishing, for example, a memory of an instance of imagining from a memory of an instance of judging.

It is arguable that in the first *Enquiry* Hume rectifies this shortcoming. There the terminology of impressions and ideas of reflection is largely replaced with allusions to inward sentiments and feelings,<sup>12</sup> or inward or internal impressions (E 63, 64).<sup>13</sup> Stacy Hansen has convincingly argued that the Hume of the Appendix and the first *Enquiry* construes the "force and vivacity" peculiar to belief as a particular kind of feeling that "attends" one's conception (see E 48),<sup>14</sup> and I have argued that at least the mature Hume construed "degrees of force and vivacity" as various kinds of "inward sentiments" corresponding to various psychological states that engender various degrees of belief (Flage 1990, 168-86). It must be stressed that there is no account of memory in the first *Enquiry*, and even an attempt to differentiate psychological states on the basis of distinct "feelings" or "inward sentiments" is at best implicit in the *Enquiry*. Nonetheless, a charitable interpretation of Hume's account of memory must allow that he can distinguish among memories as memories of different kinds of psychological states. Hence, I continue to believe that a charitable interpretation of Hume on

memory must allow that in remembering a dream as a dream there is an idea of a "feeling" peculiar to dream states<sup>15</sup> that "accompanies" an idea of sensation that constitutes the content of the dream. If it is improper to call such a feeling an "idea of reflection," so be it.

### 3. Mis-remembering

In suggesting that there are "feelings" or "inward sentiments" that "accompany" psychological states and that these "feelings" provide an elucidation of the notion of degrees of force and vivacity, I concede that my earlier articles placed insufficient stress on the phenomenal or internal difference between an idea of the memory and an idea of the imagination. Friedman is correct that it is the difference in feeling between ideas of the memory and the imagination that "is a sensible difference betwixt one species of ideas and another" (T 9) and that allows one to "distinguish them in their operation" (T 85). It is the phenomenal difference that provides the basis for the classification of ideas. Hence, it is possible to mis-remember.

As Noxon acknowledges, however, the formal criterion or external difference between an idea of memory and an idea of imagination is basically an epistemic criterion.<sup>16</sup> My interpretation of the second criterion in terms of a relative idea should be understood as nothing more than a specification of the necessary and sufficient conditions for an idea of memory to be true. But, as Friedman acknowledges (p. 186, n. 7), my specification of the relative idea corresponding to an idea of memory as "the impression that is the (original) cause of and exactly (or closely) resembles *m*" (Flage 1985a, 172) is insufficiently precise: how closely must something resemble to count as a correct idea of memory?

I am not certain there is a clear answer to this question. Truth is a hard taskmaster. Were one to suggest that there must be an *exact* resemblance between one's positive idea of memory and the impression that was its original cause,<sup>17</sup> one might well find that few, if any, memories are true: it seldom happens that one's memory contains "all the details" of the original impression. If one loosens the criterion, as I have suggested, it becomes unclear at what point one should reject one's memory as "false." The case Friedman cites of mis-remembering that her mother was holding a book at the birthday party is properly a false mnemonic belief, since any misdescription is sufficient to make the entire description of the party false. But, as one might informally say, her memory was "mostly true" or "basically correct," indicating that most elements of the positive idea of memory correspond with elements of the original impression. How many elements must correspond—how "close" the resemblance must be—probably depends upon the situation. It corresponds *roughly* to the point just before one would claim, when

discussing one's memory of an event with another, "I had thought I remembered event *x* (the correct feeling accompanied the occurrent psychological state), but I now see that I was mistaken (the evidence shows that my positive mnemonic idea cannot be an idea of *x*, that is, it shows that my idea is 'false' [T 458])."

Although one might not be able to provide precise criteria for the degree of correspondence between a positive mnemonic idea and the impression remembered, there can be little question about the importance of the distinction between ideas of the memory and ideas of the imagination. Ideas of the memory have epistemic import, ideas of the imagination do not. Nonetheless, factual beliefs based on ideas of the memory are subject to revision on the basis of the testimony of others, which testimony is itself derived from either the senses or the memory (cf. T 108).<sup>18</sup>

#### 4. Is there evidence for relative ideas of the memory?

Friedman's most potentially damaging criticism is in her remark:

there is no suggestion in any of [Hume's] remarks on memory that memory-ideas are relative ideas. In light of this it seems gratuitous to argue that Hume conceived of 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*.  
(p. 182)

Granted, Hume does not *say* that ideas of memory are relative ideas, but any minimally-adequate interpretation of Hume's ideas of memory must explain how the representative nature of mnemonic ideas is distinct from that of nonmnemonic ideas; that is, it must explain how preservation of the "same order and form with the original impressions" (T 9) is obtained. My account explains the representative nature of mnemonic ideas. Further, my account allows one to deal with various problematic cases, such as the memory of one of two qualitatively identical contemporaneous impressions (Flage 1985a, 177-79). Finally, my account allows one to remember distinct kinds of psychological states as distinct kinds of psychological states.

Since all interpretations are underdetermined by the texts, it seems that if one can develop an interpretation that is consistent with the texts, that deals successfully with otherwise anomalous texts and problematic cases, and that is both historically and philosophically plausible, there is *prima facie* evidence for that interpretation. Friedman acknowledges that Hume was aware of a doctrine of relative ideas (p. 182), and there is no question that such a doctrine was widely utilized during the early modern period. Hence, if the arguments I have

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presented here are sound, I believe it is at least plausible to suggest that Hume's ideas of memory are relative ideas.

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1. 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").
2. For my present purposes the differences here are of no consequence.
3. This was modified somewhat to deal with the case of remembering a dream. See Flage 1985b, 180.
4. Should one suggest that I use a shade of blue ink that is indistinguishable from the colour of the wall, then if I were able to see the spot at all, my ability to do so would be based on other features of the situation. For example, the fact that when I made the spot my pen made a dent in the plaster and there is a contrast of shading that allows me to see the spot. In any case, to "see" the spot requires a discernable difference between the spot and its background.
5. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 2.8.2, p. 132; see also 2.8.1, p. 132. On relative ideas see *Essay* 2.23.3, p. 296; *A Letter to the Right Reverend Edward, Lord Bishop of Worcester*, in *The Works of John Locke*, vol. 4 (1823; reprint, Darmstadt, 1963), 21-22.
6. It is not as if the positive/relative idea distinction is peculiar to Locke. Berkeley was well aware of it. See George Berkeley, *A Treatise on the Principles of Human Nature*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jessop, 9 vols. (London, 1948-57), pt. 1, secs. 16, 17, 27, 138; *Three Dialogues between Hylas and Philonous*, in *Works*, 2:197-200, 223, 232-33. Thomas Reid provided, perhaps, the clearest statement of the distinction found in the period as the distinction between *direct* and *relative* conceptions. See Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Active Powers of the Human Mind*, with introduction by Baruch Brody (Cambridge, 1969), 7-10. Nor should one assume that it is only the empiricists who were party to the positive/relative ideas distinction, for there is at least some evidence that the distinction is also found in the works of Descartes and Spinoza. See Daniel E. Flage, "The Essences of Spinoza's God," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 6 (1989): 147-60.
7. Friedman makes another claim that I find puzzling. She writes, "Hume, in his discussion of the vacuum, speaks of a point of light

- surrounded by darkness (T 55-56)" (p. 181). If one looks at the paragraph at T 55-56, there is no reference to "a point of light." The only allusion to light in the paragraph concerns a person "when entirely depriv'd of light" (T 56).
8. Notice that this differs from Max Black's universe consisting of two uniform iron spheres of the same size. (Max Black, "The Identity of Indiscernibles," in *Universals and Particulars: Readings in Ontology*, ed. Michael J. Loux [Garden City, New York, 1970], 204-16.) First, unlike a universe, a visual field has "boundaries," though they might not be terribly sharply defined. Second, a visual field has an inherent perspective, while in Black's universe the perspective is extrinsic.
  9. Saul Traiger, "Flage on Hume's Account of Memory," *Hume Studies* 11, no. 2 (November 1985): 169-70.
  10. This does not entail that all cases in which one remembers dreams are cases in which one remembers them as dreams, as Friedman's example of mis-remembering a dream indicates (p. 183).
  11. See Locke, *Essay*, 2.26.1-2, pp. 127-28; Flage 1985b, 178.
  12. See 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), 19, 20, 48, 49, 78n (hereafter cited as "E").
  13. As a search of HUMETEXT 1.0 will confirm, after the *Treatise* Hume uses the expression 'idea of reflection' on but one occasion, and that is to account for one's idea of a necessary connection (E 64). The expressions 'impression of reflection', 'impressions of reflection', and 'ideas of reflection' are not used by the post-*Treatise* Hume.
  14. Stacy J. Hansen, "Hume's Impressions of Belief," *Hume Studies* 14, no. 2 (November 1988): 277-304.
  15. I shall allow that there may not be exactly one kind of feeling peculiar to dream states. There are probably a number of feelings that resemble one another to a greater or lesser degree—this would allow one to distinguish lucid from non-lucid dreams.
  16. James Noxon, "Remembering and Imagining the Past," in *Hume: A Re-examination*, ed. Donald W. Livingston and James T. King (New York, 1976), 274.
  17. I am taking the simplest case. The considerations will apply, *mutatis mutandis*, for cases of dreams, etc.
  18. Friedman also contends that my interpretation cannot account for semantic memory. Her example is remembering "that I have my birthday at the same restaurant every year" (p. 184). On Hume's principles this cannot be remembered *simpliciter*. The claim remembered is general, while all ideas are particular (and of

particulars) (T 19). If Friedman can *remember* some "general fact," this must be a memory of a judgement made at some previous time. Granted, given Hume's account of meaning in *Treatise* 1.1.7, remembering the content of that judgement will involve linguistic ideas, but there is no reason why linguistic ideas constitute any peculiar problem for my account of memory.

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