



Reply to Flage

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Reply to Flage

Lesley Friedman

“The *chief* exercise of the memory,” Hume tells us, “is not to preserve the simple ideas, but their order and position.”¹ On Daniel Flage’s interpretation of Hume, however, it is the *only* exercise of the memory (1985a, 1985b, 1990). Flage’s account can accommodate only memories of complex ideas; he disallows the possibility of ‘preserving’ a simple idea in its simplicity. Yet there is an example of a purely simple impression in the *Treatise*; and since for every impression there is in principle a corresponding idea which we can later recall, this example establishes the existence of a purely simple memory-idea. In what follows I will provide support for this claim, Flage’s counterarguments (this volume) notwithstanding.

Flage argues that given any perceived object, say a coloured dot, there is a visual field in which we perceive it. This field and the impression we receive from 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” (1993, 190). Flage is probably right about this; from our point of view, it is implausible to suggest that there is any purely simple background, or worse, that there is no impression of a background at all. Nonetheless, my concern is with what Hume thought and not with what is plausible or implausible; and Hume does give an example of a “background” that is not complex, namely, the scenario in which we perceive points of light in darkness.

We may observe, that when two bodies present themselves, where there was formerly an entire darkness, the only change, that is discoverable, is in the appearance of these two objects, and that all the rest continues to be as before, a perfect negation of light, and of every colour’d or visible object. This is not only true of what may be said to be remote from these bodies, but also of the very distance; which is interpos’d betwixt them; *that being nothing but darkness, or the negation of light; without parts, without composition, invariable and indivisible.* (T 57, bold italics added)

I originally considered the ink spot experiment and the idea of red in the dark as examples of purely simple impressions. Let me try this

again, elaborating a bit more on the latter (what I take to be Hume's example of a version of the ink spot experiment). Early on in the *Treatise* Hume speaks of "that idea of red which we form in the dark" (T 3). Let us then consider a red spot in complete darkness. Flage and I agree that this spot is qualitatively simple. Our disagreement is rooted in the nature of the "background," in this case the darkness.

Flage claims that "the sighted-person sitting in the dark has an impression or impressions, namely, an impression of darkness" (1993, 190); and therefore the impression we have of the spot of red in darkness is not purely simple. In support of this claim he cites the following evidence: Hume's remarks that (1) "the sighted-person sitting in the dark 'receives *no other* perception ... than what is common to him with one born blind'" (ibid., 189; T 55-56), and (2) "the idea of utter darkness can never be the same with that of vacuum" (T 56). Let me take each of these in turn. Presumably, the first quote is cited in order to establish that the blind person does indeed have a perception (impression) of darkness. This cannot be right; if such a person had an impression of darkness, he would also have an idea of darkness, and if we look to the part of the sentence which Flage leaves out of his quotation, we find the following: "and 'tis certain such-a-one [that is, a blind person] has no idea either of light or darkness" (T 56). Hume's point is simple: the reason that the blind person has no idea of darkness is because he has no impression of darkness; *and we are in the same position as him when we are sitting in the dark.*

Nor does the second quote provide evidence for the claim that Hume holds that we have an idea of darkness. True, Hume does speak of our "idea of utter darkness," but very little follows from this, for he speaks as well in this sentence of our "idea of vacuum," and his entire point in this section is to show that we have no such idea. "But tho' motion and darkness, either alone, or attended with tangible and visible objects, convey no idea of a vacuum or extension without matter, yet they are the causes why we falsly imagine we can form such an idea" (T 58).

As I mentioned earlier, Flage's attempt to establish that the background darkness renders the impression of red complex fails for another reason, namely, that Hume claims that we have no positive idea of darkness. In response to this Flage writes:

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

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was concerned with a "positive idea" in the second sense.
(1993, 189)

The problem here is that Flage neglects to explain what a positive idea in this second sense would be. The relevant question then is: just what is the distinction between positive and negative ideas? I would suggest the following: whether contrasted with relative ideas or with negative ideas, positive ideas are mental images. A negative idea is simply the absence of a positive idea or mental image. " 'Tis evident the idea of darkness is no positive idea, but merely the negation of light, or more properly speaking, of colour'd and visible objects" (T 55). What we have of darkness cannot be a picture, or an 'idea' in the sense generally used by Hume. Rather, it is more like a relative idea that has no causal antecedent, that is, no corresponding impression.² Recall that darkness is "a perfect negation of light, and of every colour'd or visible object" (T 57). Given Hume's claim that, "If a point be not consider'd as colour'd or tangible, it can convey to us no idea" (T 39), we are led to the conclusion that we have nothing visible in mind when we think of darkness; that is, no mental image of darkness. Since there is no impression of the darkness, Hume's spot of red in complete darkness is an example of a purely simple impression of which one can have a purely simple idea. Consequently, Flage's interpretation of Humean memory-ideas cannot be adequate, for it rules out memories of such purely simple ideas.

In response to my criticism that his account of remembering dreams conflicts with Hume's account of impressions of reflection in the *Treatise*, Flage clarifies as follows: "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" (1993, 192). But Flage also acknowledges 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*" (ibid.). This raises an interesting question about interpretation; namely, at what point does an account of a text cease to be an 'interpretation' and begin to be simply a new (and distinct) discussion of an old issue? This is a difficult line to draw; yet at the very least it seems clear that if (1) there is no textual evidence for the account, and (2) such an account runs counter to passages in the text, we can no longer say that we are in the business of giving an 'interpretation' of the philosopher in question. Moreover, we cannot overlook the possibility that there is a reason why some discussion is omitted from a text. Flage concedes that "all interpretations are underdetermined by the texts" (1993, 194), and it is my position (still)

that Hume purposely neglected the topic because he was not interested in getting involved in this debate.

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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, emphasis added (hereafter cited as "T").
2. Flage understands Humean memory-ideas as relative ideas, and he explains relative ideas as the "cognitive analogues of definite descriptions" (1981, 55). In Flagean terms, I am explaining Humean negative ideas as relative ideas which have no causal antecedent; and such relative ideas can be understood as the cognitive analogues of failed, that is, non-denoting, definite descriptions.

List of Sources

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