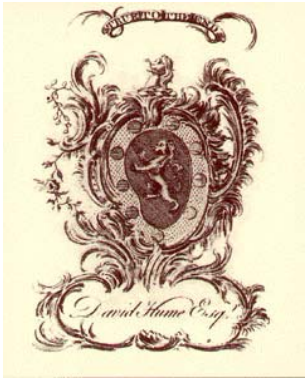

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Explaining General Ideas

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Hume declared himself a scientist of man; his aim was to identify the principles according to which our impressions give rise to our thoughts, beliefs, passions and actions. He took it that there are things about these products of experience that need to be explained, and as a scientist of man he aimed to provide the needed explanation by finding principles that govern the operations of the mind. In what follows I want to consider Hume's account of general ideas, and I want especially to raise the question what it is about them that he wants to explain.

In order to see what Hume thinks he should explain about our general ideas, we need first to see what sort of explanatory resources he thinks are available. In the introduction to the *Treatise*, he proposes to undertake a study of human nature, a study of the particular kind that he calls science of man. He is going to study the human mind using "careful and exact experiments"[1] gleaned up from a "cautious observation of human life" as it appears in the "common course of the world" (T xix). The outcome will be the discovery of "principles," and Hume aims to render them "as universal as possible," "explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes" (T xvii).

By itself this sounds awfully bland. How does it differ from the generalizations any of us might make about human mental life? On one common understanding of Hume, the answer is that he is studying objects we don't ordinarily talk about, using a method of observation we don't ordinarily use. He is studying what Locke called "ideas": the items of which a person is imme-

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diately aware, and which depend on that awareness for their existence. He is studying them by using his power of introspection, the power by which a person may become immediately aware of his own ideas.

I have argued elsewhere[2] that Hume's term, 'perception,' isn't meant to refer to Lockean ideas but to people's states of mind as we ordinarily understand them: dateable episodes of consciousness of a great many types, including episodes of seeing, touching, smelling, tasting and hearing objects in the world around us. Nor, I have argued, does Hume's "cautious observation of human life" (T xix) invariably or even usually take the form of introspection. Rather, the scientist of man attends to a range of the features of perceptions that we notice from time to time in ordinary life. What distinguishes the activities of the scientist of man from those of the ordinary observer of human mental life is that the scientist of man attends *mainly just* to this range of features, and reflects upon them in a sustained and systematic way. The features to which he gives his attention are, I believe, these: force and vivacity; content compounded from simple elements; and the kinds of sequences or patterns in which perceptions with such-and-such content having such-and-such force and vivacity occur.

Of these three features, the most puzzling by far, I think, is content; I will be exploring aspects of content as I attempt to identify what it is about general ideas that the scientist of man wants to understand. To put it crudely, we must see what Hume thinks impressions already contain if we want to see what it is about general ideas he wants to explain.

In the first part of Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume sets out the basic distinctions and principles upon which he will draw: the distinctions between impressions and ideas, between simple and complex perceptions, between impressions of sensation and those of reflection, and between ideas of memory and of imagination; and the principles that our simple ideas are derived from resembling simple impressions, and that our ideas are associated via relations of resemblance, contiguity and causation. After clarifying the notion of relations, Hume concludes part i by using these basic scientific distinctions and principles to answer several important questions raised by "philosophers" (T 15; 18). Section 6 concerns the concepts of substance and mode; and section 7, the culminating (and longest) section of part i, concerns general ideas.

In section 7, Hume aims to explain how we can use words so that they have general signification. He proposes to show how the signification of a person's words can be explained in terms of the ideas, the sequences of perceptions and the dispositions to form ideas that a person has. He will claim that words are made general by a connection with general ideas, and he describes the special challenge he faces as that posed by the fact (as he sees it) that all our ideas "are particular in their nature" (T 24): he wonders how we can have general ideas when all our ideas are particular.

As he makes clear in the first paragraph of section 7, he thinks of himself as siding here with Berkeley against Locke. As both Berkeley and Hume saw him, Locke thought that words are general, or capable of signifying all the particular things of a certain sort, when they signify general ideas, and he thought that the difference between general and particular ideas lies in the kind of content that they have. Hume attributes to Locke the view that what is distinctive about the content of general ideas is that they "represent no particular degree either of quantity or quality" (T 18). Like Berkeley, Hume believes that none of our ideas can have this sort of content, and that an account of the generality of words must therefore appeal only to "particular" ideas and the ways in which we connect these ideas with one another and with words.

Before I turn to the interpretative question of *exactly* what Hume aims to explain, let me quickly sketch out, in as a neutral a way as I can, the account of general terms that he gives. He says a word is made general by being associated with an idea that is itself, through that same associative process, connected by the imagination with other ideas.

> When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, . . . whatever . . . differences may appear among them. After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects . . . and revives that custom, which we acquir'd by surveying them. (T 20)

Hume is here making a complicated appeal to the processes of imaginative association that he had described three sections earlier. Consider the following sequence: I hear the sounds "taybul" as I see a thick-topped table, "tayeebul" as I see a thin-topped table, and "taybul" as I see a drop-leaf table. This sequence of experiences does two things. First, when I next have an auditory impression similar to one of those in that sequence, my imagination will produce in me the idea of one of the tables whose visual impression was contiguous in time with one of those resembling auditory impressions. For example, suppose that after that having that sequence of experiences, I hear "taybul." Hume is saying that because I have had that sequence of experiences, I will form the idea of one of the tables I saw—say, the drop-leaf table.

But that is not all that will happen when I hear "taybul"; my sequence of impressions has an additional effect on me. When I hear "taybul," I will not only call up the idea of the drop-leaf table; I will also be in a state of readiness to call to mind an idea of the thick-topped table, the thin-topped table, and so on. I am disposed to call to mind any of a number of ideas: any of those that my experience has caused me to associate with "taybul" (or any similar sound). This "admirable" (T 24) readiness is supposed to explain first how "table" can signify many things, rather than none or one. It signifies many things insofar

as I am disposed to call the ideas of many things to mind. This disposition is also supposed to explain how the word can signify the *right* many—as we might say, *tables*. For example, suppose I tried to use my idea of a gate-legged table to "form" the "reasoning" (T 21) that all tables are gate-legged. This would leave me using "table" to signify the *wrong* many, the gate-legged tables rather than the gate-legged tables *and* the fixed-leg tables. What Hume says is admirable about the mind is that it will, under these circumstances, tend to produce in me an idea of a table with fixed legs. My word "table" signifies *tables*, rather than *gate-legged tables*, in virtue of my mind's having this tendency.[3]

Now let me turn to the question of what Hume wants to explain by offering this account of general terms. On a very natural understanding of Hume's aim, this account of general terms will be defective, for it will appeal to the very ability it is supposed to explain. In order for my imagination to be readied to call up ideas of various tables, I need first to have noticed the respect in which the various tables resemble one another (and for that matter the respect in which the various utterances of "table" resemble one another). It is only when I have noticed these resemblances that my experience can work upon my imagination and prod it into forming the custom or habit that links one particular idea to the many particular ideas in the "collection, which [the mind] intends to express by the general term" (T 22). But then it seems that Hume's explanation must be circular: how can someone notice that one thing resembles another in respect of tablehood unless he already has the general idea of table?

That is how Kemp Smith criticizes Hume's explanation of general terms. He charges Hume with failing to address "the main questions—in what abstract general or universal ideas consist, and how they are possible,"[4] and traces Hume's failure to his beginning his account by saying, "When we have found a resemblance among several objects . . . ." Kemp Smith says,

> The reader will note . . . that in [these] words . . . the possibility, and indeed the actuality, of the *abstract*, or at least of the *general* or *universal*, which Hume treats as synonymous with the abstract, is already taken for granted . . . . [I]n insisting that . . . apprehension [of resemblance] is antecedent to the process of naming, and therefore also antecedent to the operation of custom, Hume is cutting the ground from under his own theory . . . . The associative machinery . . . cannot be made to account for what it . . . presupposes . . . .[5]

Kemp Smith zeroes in on the way Hume begins his account: Hume says that we must have "found" a resemblance among several objects. Kemp Smith takes this wording to mean that what I must have done is first noticed of this thing that it is a table, of that thing that it is a table, and so on, and then noticed

that this and that resemble one another in respect of being tables.[6] It is hard to think how else I could have found a resemblance among several objects, except by having been aware of their features and of their resemblance in respect of those features. And it is hard to think how I could be aware of this thing's feature *F* except by being aware that this has feature *F*—which is surely to have the concept of *F* and apply it to this thing. But then Hume really would be "cutting the ground from under his own theory," by appealing in the "theory" to the very capacity it is supposed to be explaining.

Further reflection seems to reveal an even broader problem. It may well seem that our sense-impressions have content only insofar as we are aware of the features of things as we see, hear, touch, taste and smell them. But then by reasoning similar to Kemp Smith's, we could not even have *impressions* without having the general conceptual capacities that Hume is trying to explain, for to have an impression would be to be aware of the feature *F* of something, which would require me to be aware that the thing has *F*, which would require me to have the concept of *F*. This conclusion would constitute a very broad criticism of Hume. We would again be charging him with trying to explain our capacity to have general ideas by appealing to that very capacity; but now we would be locating the problem not in Hume's specific claim that we notice resemblances, but in the very broad claim, essential to his science of man, that we have impressions.[7] So if Hume aims to explain how we acquire general concepts from our particular impressions, his explanatory enterprise seems to be doomed. Worse still, he seems unable to give an account of the content of impressions without making our capacity to have contentful impressions depend upon our possession of general ideas.

But must we interpret Hume in this way? I would like to resist this interpretation and instead to understand Hume's account of general ideas as aiming to explain less than we may at first assume he is trying to explain. This will require that we see why Hume thought explaining less was nonetheless explaining enough.

On the interpretation I want to resist, Hume's account of general ideas would have to explain all of the following:

- how we can use words so that they have general signification, that is, how we can signify many things and the "right many";
- how we can recognize the features of things and the respects in which they resemble one another; and
- how we can discriminate perceptually among things.

Hume's account would have to explain all of these capacities because, on this interpretation, they are all the same capacity. I do think Hume means for his account to explain how it is that we can use words to signify many things and the right many. But I do not think we should see him as equating those abili-

ties either with the capacity to *recognize* the features of things and the ways in which they resemble one another, or with the capacity to *discriminate perceptually* among things. Once we prise these capacities apart, we may be able to defend Hume against the charges of circularity that I have just sketched.[8]

We may be able to derive some support for this interpretative strategy from the fact that Locke and Berkeley are also happy to appeal to our capacity to recognize the respects in which things resemble one another in their explanations of our capacity to form abstract or general ideas.[9] Of course, this may just mean that they, like Hume, are engaged in a doomed explanatory enterprise.[10] But as sympathetic readers, we should surely *try* to see how or why these philosophers might have thought that we have capacities of recognition and discrimination that are in some way different from our capacity to use words to signify the "right many."

I am not sure in the end what we should say about Locke and Berkeley,[11] but I think there is a very good reason to think that for Hume these are different capacities: he gives them different explanations.[12] I will say something about perceptual discrimination presently; let me begin with our capacity to recognize the features of things. While I agree with Kemp Smith that Hume did intend to explain this capacity of ours, I think that his explanation of it is to be found in his account of the "distinction of reason," an account that is independent of his explanation of general terms.[13]

Hume turns to the distinction of reason at the end of section 7, saying that he wants to explain how we can "consider" or "distinguish" (T 25) a feature of an object when the feature is inseparable from others. His explanation is roughly this: we are recognizing, say, the figure of a white globe when we "consider [its] color and figure together, but still keep in our eye the resemblance to [a] globe of black marble" (T 25). He does not make completely clear what it is he thinks we do when we keep a resemblance "in our eye," but he gives us a hint in this passage:

> observing . . . a globe of black marble and a cube of white, and comparing them with our [globe of white marble], we find two separate resemblances, in what formerly seem'd, and really is, perfectly inseparable. (T 25)

This suggests that we single out the figure of the white globe when we form a complex idea with this as its content: the respect in which this white globe resembles that black globe but does not resemble that white cube.

I am claiming that this is Hume's account of our general capacity to recognize the features of things. Someone might, however, object to my claim by arguing that for Hume the distinction of reason concerns only a limited range of cases. After all, Hume's examples concern distinguishing color from shape (T 25), figure from body and motion from "the body mov'd" (T 24), which sug-

gests that the distinction of reason comes into play only when we recognize a feature of an object that is inseparable from some other feature of the object.

I agree that those are the relevant cases, but not that they belong to a limited range. For Hume, *any perception of a feature of an object is inseparable from others*. Just a few pages earlier he had argued that any impression or idea must be an "image in the mind" that is "only that of a *particular object*" (T 20, emphasis added). Thus the perception of any feature of an object is inextricably bound up with the other elements of the perception that make it a perception of a particular object.[14] So a person may be said to be recognizing or considering that feature, exclusive of others, only when he forms a complex idea of the type Hume describes in the distinction-of-reason passage. For Hume, then, what needs explaining about our capacity to recognize a feature of a thing is our capacity to zero in on just one feature, given its inevitable inseparability from many other elements of perceptions.

This claim may seem to be undercut by Hume's readiness to say that some distinct sense-impressions may be simple. He is ready to imagine a mind with just the impression of hunger or thirst (T 634), for example; why then, would he deny that a person could have an impression just of a smell, a taste, or a sound? It may seem that in having a simple and distinct impression, a person must have zeroed in on what I am calling a feature, without any need for making a distinction of reason. But although there may be simple impressions that are separable from all other simple impressions, they are not impressions of single features, as Hume himself stresses.[15] In a note he appended to his account of general ideas, he said,

> 'Tis evident, that even different simple ideas may have a similarity or resemblance to each other; nor is it necessary, that the point or circumstance of resemblance shou'd be distinct or separable from that in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*; tho' their perfect simplicity excludes all possibility of separation or distinction. 'Tis the same case with particular sounds, and tastes and smells. These admit of infinite resemblances upon the general appearance and comparison, without having any common circumstance the same. (T 637)

I am suggesting, then, that Hume's account of the distinction of reason is his account of our capacity to recognize features of things. What, then, would be his account of our capacity to discriminate perceptually among things? I want to address this question by raising and answering a question about the distinction of reason, as I understand it. On my view, Hume seems committed to saying that perceptions of *unrecognized* features may be among the elements composing the contents of our sense-impressions. After all, my having the sense-impressions that I do had better not depend upon my having formed the

complex idea by which I make a distinction of reason. Impressions do not depend upon ideas. But the possibility of unrecognized yet sensed features may seem troubling: it may seem to commit Hume to saying that we have sense-impressions of things of which we are unaware, and since impressions are states of awareness, this seems uncomfortably close to self-contradictory.

But there need not be any contradiction here.[16] Suppose I am looking at a table. The object of my impression—the table—has many features. It is composed of a great many molecules; it is green; it is well-made; it is four-legged; it is grue. Let us say that for me, some of these features *register perceptually* and some do not. A feature registers perceptually with me, or is "in" my impression of a thing, when it disposes me to recognize it or to form a general idea of it. So, for example, two tables that I see may be alike in having the same combustion point or in being grue, but those resemblances aren't by themselves going to dispose me to notice them or to form the general ideas of such-and-such combustion point or of grue. The tables are also alike in being green and four-legged. Those resemblances, I think Hume would say, can, by themselves, dispose me to recognize them or to form the general idea of green or of being four-legged. So when I see the tables, part of my visual impression is "of green" and part of it is "of four legs"; these are elements of the contents of my visual impression.[17]

There is an interpretative bonus in linking perceptual discrimination in this way with our ability to recognize resemblances or to form general ideas. We can then explain an otherwise puzzling claim that Hume makes in the very first section of the *Treatise*: "all the perceptions of the mind are double, and appear both as impressions and ideas"; "[i]deas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other" (T 3). Hume's main point here, of course, is that for every simple idea there is a corresponding simple impression, but his claim also entails that for every simple impression there is a corresponding idea. This reflection in our ideas of what we experience may seem less puzzling if we think of the contents of experience as the aspects of the things we experience that dispose us to form reflecting ideas of them.

Still, as I am reading Hume, he would allow that I *might* have had an impression of a feature of a thing without having done what I am disposed to do—without having recognized it as a feature and without having formed the general idea of such a feature. Could I then be said to be *conscious* of the feature? Although Hume says very little that bears on this question, I believe that if pressed he would say 'yes.' He describes as a "thinking being" a "mind . . . reduc'd even below the life of an oyster" having "only one perception, as of hunger or thirst" (T 634). The perception of hunger or thirst would be an impression; since that is the only perception the thinking being has, the thinking being could not also have the complex idea that would constitute recognizing hunger or thirst, nor could it form a general idea of hunger or thirst. Yet the being is a "thinking being," which is to say, a conscious being. I think we

are bound to wonder here how Hume wants to connect the notion of a content of consciousness with the notion of a disposition to form ideas; this is one of many places where treating consciousness as a primitive "*je-ne-scai-quoi*" (T 106) does not serve his purposes well.

To sum up, Hume does not think our capacity to form general ideas is the same as our capacity to recognize the features of things, nor does he think either of those capacities is the same as our capacity to register the features of things perceptually in our consciousness. Thus when he begins his account of our capacity to form general ideas by saying "we have found a resemblance among several objects" (T 20), he is not appealing to the very capacity he is supposed to explain. He is appealing to different capacities: our capacities to register and recognize the features of things. What puzzles him about general ideas is how they allow the associated general term to signify many things, and the right collection of many things. The explanatory key to *this* puzzle, he thinks, is the associative power of the mind. When we have "found a resemblance" repeatedly, this associative power forms a custom or habit whose operation, Hume argues, explains the generality and scope of the signification of general terms.

I do not mean to suggest that by adopting this interpretation of Hume we will see his account of general terms as a fully successful one. Let me sketch out an important problem this interpretation brings into focus. It is not clear whether Hume thinks our associative powers are activated simply by repetition of resembling impression-contents, or whether he thinks that *recognizing* the resemblance of the repeated features is required as well. To put it another way, it is not clear whether for Hume a person's acquisition of a general idea would be explained by the prior occurrence of sequences of impressions that just *in fact* resemble in certain ways, or whether the explanation Hume offers requires also that the person *pick out* or notice the features in respect of which the resemblances hold.

Related questions arise for other explanations of ideas that Hume offers. Let me give one central example here. At least part of what needs explaining about any idea we have is how it has arisen from impressions. Well, suppose I form an idea of a red square. Does Hume hold that the origin of the idea would be adequately explained simply by my having seen a red circle and a blue square, so long as *red, blue, circular* and *square* have registered in my experience? Or does he hold that the origin of the idea would not be explained unless it were also true that I had attended to (considered, recognized) the color of the red circle and the shape of the blue square? After Hume describes the distinction of reason, he says, "By this means we accompany our ideas with a kind of reflexion, of which custom renders us, in a great measure, insensible" (T 25). My concern is whether this "kind of reflexion" has an essential role to play in explaining the origin of ideas.

The problem here is not just that Hume doesn't tell us, one way or the other, what an adequate explanation requires. The full problem, I think, is that he does not have the resources with which he could make one answer more plausible than the other. He cannot point to a constant conjunction of events, or to a lack of constant conjunction, when one of the events is "a kind of reflexion, of which custom renders us, in large measure, *insensible*" (T 25, emphasis added). But the science of man does not offer him any other primary resources to draw upon in explaining our ideas.

NOTES

I want to thank Elizabeth Radcliffe and Ken Winkler for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper. I first presented these ideas in a talk that I gave at the 1995 meetings of the Hume Society, and I am grateful to everyone there who offered comments, criticisms and suggestions.

1 *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), xvii. Subsequent page references to this work, indicated as "T," will be provided in the body of the paper.

2 "What Does the Scientist of Man Observe?" *Hume Studies* 18 (1992): 155–68. I am in agreement with Annette Baier about this, though I disagree with some of the conclusions she draws from it. See *A Progress of Sentiments: Reflections on Hume's* Treatise (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), especially 32–33 and 117–120.

3 There are several pressing questions about this account that I will not be addressing. One is how Hume will explain my use of "table" to signify tables I haven't seen. Another is what explanatory role the conjured-up image plays: after all, the mind's disposition seems to do all the explanatory work. This is a question Margaret Wilson raises in "On Garrett's Hume," *Hume Studies* 24 (1998), 137. Garrett replies in "Ideas, Reason, and Skepticism: Replies to my Critics," *Hume Studies* 24 (1998), 175. For an argument that the image doesn't do any work, see Andrew Ushenko, "Hume's Theory of General Ideas," *Review of Metaphysics* 9 (1955): 236–251.

4 *The Philosophy of David Hume: A Critical Study of Its Origin and Central Doctrines* (London: Macmillan, 1941, reprinted New York: Garland Publishing, 1983), 257.

5 Kemp Smith, 259-260. For a similar criticism, see also H. O. Mounce, *Hume's Naturalism* (London: Routledge, 1999), 27–28.

6 I won't yet know that "table" is the word for things with the feature I am noticing, but this does not straighten out the circular explanation.

7 Of course, I might see and touch a table without having the concept *table*; but, it seems, I couldn't have impressions of a table without having *some* concepts—perhaps, for example, those of *brown* and *hard*.

8 Wayne Waxman is also concerned to distinguish among capacities Hume appeals to, though not in quite this way. See *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 94–105.

9 I am grateful to Ken Winkler for suggesting this to me.

10 Kemp Smith (260) explicitly makes this charge against Berkeley.

11 Waxman claims that neither Locke nor Berkeley explained "the intellectual operations of discerning aspects" (94).

12 Here might be one way in which his ambitions differ from Locke's or Berkeley's; they do not seem to see anything about these capacities that calls for any particular explanation.

13 In *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), chapter 3, Don Garrett claims that in the distinction-of-reason passage Hume is invoking the associative mechanisms that, in the account of general terms, allow us to delineate a "revival set" (63) of ideas for a general term. While this nicely explains Hume's own claim to be having "recourse to the foregoing explication of abstract ideas" (T 25), I am struck by the fact that Hume does not explicitly invoke associative mechanisms in the account of the distinction of reason that he actually goes on to give. I am not convinced that he has these mechanisms in mind; he seems instead to be trying to account for a form of attention that we can exercise in response to our perceptions. Waxman (97-98) makes a claim similar to Garrett's.

14 In *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of his* Treatise (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), David Pears argues that these other elements will themselves also be perceptions of features; he thinks that for Hume the particularity of ideas consists in their being the counterparts of definite descriptions (18). For a somewhat different account of the particularity of ideas, see John Tienson, "Hume on Universals and General Terms," *Noûs* 18 (1984), 311–330. According to Tienson, Hume takes it that in experience we become aware of perfectly determinate qualities, or "skinny universals," and then aims to explain how on that basis we can use those general terms that do not simply ascribe perfectly determinate qualities to things.

15 Don Garrett (chapter 3) argues that simple impressions *need* not be impressions of single features. This seems right to me as far as it goes, but I am going a little farther.

16 Here is one of the places where I think we can understand part i more easily by not attributing to Hume a Lockean theory of ideas.

17 These might or might not be *simple* elements, however.