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# Hume's Impression of Will

JOSHUA M. WOOD

*Abstract:* The standard interpretation of the impression of will takes Hume to advance two substantive claims about the experience of willing an act. The first claim holds that this experience is readily introspectible; the second that this experience is strictly antecedent to the performance of an act. This interpretation has rendered the impression of will vulnerable to two lines of criticism. One problem is introspective. We are not normally aware of a distinct experience of willing an act. Another problem is temporal. It is odd to think that the experience of volition is something that occurs in its entirety prior to the performance of an act. I argue that the standard interpretation, which burdens Hume with an implausible view of the experience of willing an act, imports claims for which there is insufficient textual evidence and which are not required by his theoretical commitments.

## 1. Introduction

The “impression of will” is intended to pick out the experience of *willing* an act. Hume discusses this impression in the *Treatise* primarily in terms of its psychological setting, describing it as “*the internal impression we feel and are conscious of, when we knowingly give rise to any new motion of our body, or new perception of our mind*” (T 2.3.1.2; SBN 399).<sup>1</sup> It is not obvious what Hume means in this and related passages. Scholars have offered a number of suggestions about how the impression of will fits into Hume’s overall moral psychology.<sup>2</sup> But the specific issue I want to raise here concerns two substantive claims about the *experience* of willing an act

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that are attributed to Hume with some frequency. The first claim holds that the impression of will is intended to pick out an internal experience that is readily discoverable by means of introspection. The second claim holds that the impression of will picks out an experience that is strictly antecedent to the performance of an act. I will refer to the reading that attributes these two claims to Hume as the “standard interpretation.” This is the interpretation of Hume’s impression of will that is most often discussed in the literature, and most often associated with a uniquely Humean account of voluntary action.

I believe the standard interpretation is not only insufficiently motivated, but introduces costs that are as unnecessary as they are uncharitable. For this reading is responsible for two trenchant and remarkably straightforward criticisms of the impression of will. The first objection argues that Hume, who takes the impression of will to be readily discoverable, advances a claim about volition that is at odds with everyday experience. The problem is that we are not normally aware of an internal experience of willing an act. I argue that the success of this objection depends on attributing to Hume a gratuitously strong claim about the introspective availability of the impression of will. The second objection argues that Hume, who takes the experience of willing an act to be strictly antecedent to voluntary action, holds an implausible view. For volition, rather than being a mere antecedent of action, ordinarily accompanies an act for the duration of its performance. I argue that Hume is not necessarily committed to the claim on which the success of this objection depends. If my defense of Hume is correct in both cases, then this has a significant consequence for our understanding of his impression of will. It releases him from commitments that, embarrassingly for an empiricist such as Hume who possesses a gift for penetrating and nuanced descriptions of human psychology, are immediately discredited by a cursory survey of ordinary experience. I provide here reasons to oppose the standard interpretation as well as an invitation to rethink what is ultimately demanded by Hume’s references to an experience of volition.

## 2. The Standard Interpretation of the Impression of Will

There are, for my purposes, essentially four claims about the experience of willing an act that commentators attribute to Hume. The first of these concerns no more than the occurrence of an impression of will in ordinary cases.

The GENERALITY THESIS holds that, all things being equal, the impression of will simply occurs when we act voluntarily.

The second and third claims offer different suggestions about the degree of introspectibility that Hume assigns to the impression of will. It might be helpful to think of these claims as competing attempts to either parse Hume’s remark that

“we feel and are conscious” of the impression of will or situate this experience within his overarching theory of impressions.

The PROMINENCE THESIS holds that tokens of the impression of will *never* fail to be psychologically prominent.

The FAMILIARITY THESIS holds that tokens of this impression—which, short of being psychologically inescapable, may very well go unnoticed—are nevertheless something with which we might readily acquaint ourselves by means of introspection.

The fourth claim about the impression of will, which is compatible with either of the above introspectibility claims, concerns the temporal relation between the experience of volition and the performance of an act. It is helpful to understand this temporality claim as an attempt to integrate the impression of will into Hume's theory of causation, according to which we, on the basis of constant conjunction, come to regard otherwise discrete events as causally related.

The STRICT PRIORITY THESIS holds that the impression of will is *strictly antecedent* to action such that the experience of willing an act occurs in its *entirety* prior to the performance of an act.

I will suggest here that the standard interpretation of Hume's impression of will combines the generality thesis, the familiarity thesis, and the strict priority thesis.

As it seems to me, the generality thesis, a rather weak claim, is assumed to be part of Hume's view by virtually every commentator who offers an interpretation of the impression of will. It is a claim, then, that clearly belongs to the standard interpretation of this impression.<sup>3</sup> The generality thesis, which will not occupy our attention much throughout the present investigation, is notable in that it restricts itself to the mere occurrence of an impression of will without specifying additional introspective or temporal features of this impression. Such aspects of the impression of will are singled out by separate and more substantive claims.

John Bricke is unique among commentators in attributing the prominence thesis to Hume. Bricke takes Hume to hold that the impression of will is “obvious to introspection” and something of which we are “immediately aware” (*Mind and Morality*, 53). The introspectibility claim that Bricke assigns to Hume holds that if the impression of will occurs, then it does so in a way that is psychologically inescapable. It is in this sense that the impression of will is regarded as prominent. While the prominence thesis is not part of the standard interpretation, it is useful for clarifying the degree of introspectibility that is typically attributed to Hume's view of the impression of will.

The familiarity thesis is often assumed to be Hume's view of the introspective availability of the impression of will. This claim, therefore, is a feature of the standard interpretation. Terence Penelhum, for example, takes Hume to hold that

volitions are “readily detectable components in the mechanism of human choice” (“Hume’s Moral Psychology,” 254). Páll Árdal states that, according to Hume, “the reader is supposed to be capable of identifying this ‘internal impression’ easily enough” (*Passion and Value*, 81). And Claudia Schmidt tells us that, so far as Hume is concerned, this impression is “familiar to everyone through introspection” (*Reason and History*, 197). This reading of the impression of will does not require Hume to endorse the prominence thesis, since this reading does not commit him to the view that the impression of will never fails to be psychologically prominent. The present reading merely requires Hume to endorse the weaker claim that the experience of willing an act is ordinarily discoverable, even in those cases in which it fails to be psychologically inescapable, by simply looking inward.

Some commentators certainly take Hume to advance the strict priority thesis. Alexander Broadie, for example, writes that Hume, in claiming that we have an experience of volition, “has in mind an impression antecedent to the motion of the body or perception of the mind to which we knowingly give rise” (*Tradition of Scottish Philosophy*, 121). Broadie, who denies that the impression of will is “something concurrent” with voluntary action, offers a version of the strict priority thesis (121). Stephen Mumford and Rani Lill Anjum suggest that, given “Hume’s description” of causal relations generally, he adopts the view that voluntary action consists of “two temporally distinct events: one a willing and the other a bodily movement” (*Getting Causes from Powers*, 204). The temporal distinctness of these events, according to Mumford and Anjum, consists in their occurring with no degree of simultaneity or continuity.

But the strict priority thesis serves an added purpose in that it permits us to state clearly an otherwise tacit feature of the view that is widely attributed to Hume. Many commentators seem to either implicitly attribute the strict priority thesis to Hume or gesture toward a commitment of this kind in their purportedly Humean descriptions of voluntary action. For example, Barry Stroud claims that, according to Hume, in cases of voluntary action “all we are aware of . . . is at first a felt ‘volition,’ and *then* an impression of what happens next” (“‘Gilding or Staining’ the World,” 26; my emphasis). Jennifer Hornsby takes Hume to maintain that “instances of agency consist of items—volitions, and *then* movements of muscles, nerves, animal spirits and, *eventually*, limbs” (“Agency and Actions,” 12; my emphasis). And Thomas Baldwin writes: “The Humean account . . . makes it seem that I raise my arm by engaging in an appropriate mental act and then *waiting* for the results of that act” (“Objectivity, Causality, and Agency,” 114; my emphasis).<sup>4</sup> These and similar characterizations of Hume’s view would seem to imply that the experience of volition is in no way continuous with the performance of an act. For some of these descriptions, drawing to one extent or another on the strict priority thesis, are designed by critics to convey what they regard as the obvious implausibility of Hume’s account of the experience of voluntary action. Therefore I take the strict

priority thesis to stand alongside the familiarity thesis as substantive features of the standard interpretation of the impression of will.<sup>5</sup>

### 3. Introspectibility and the Impression of Will

Without challenging the assumption that we have an experience of willing an act, some commentators argue that the impression of will is a mere fiction and that this can be demonstrated on the basis of introspection. There are two versions of this objection and each of them draws on a different claim about the introspective availability of the experience of willing. I will start with the version whose success depends on attributing the more theoretically burdensome position to Hume. This version is advanced by Bricke. He states that instances of the impression of will are tantamount to “phenomenologically prominent pushes and pulls” (“Hume’s Volitions,” 86). Bricke does not allow for qualitative deviations among tokens of this impression. Instances of the impression of will, according to Bricke, are psychologically inescapable.<sup>6</sup> Combining the generality thesis with the prominence thesis, Bricke takes Hume to hold the following view of the impression of will: “one is immediately aware of them in one’s every voluntary action; one is aware, by introspection, of their phenomenologically distinctive character” (*Mind and Morality*, 53). If *this* is Hume’s view of the impression of will, then his position is clearly vulnerable to counterexample. We can identify numerous instances of voluntary action, even mundane cases, in which we are not aware of a psychologically prominent experience of volition. For example, when I lift a cup of coffee to my lips I am well aware of its warmth and aroma, but I am not aware of having a phenomenologically robust experience of willing this action. Hence, according to Bricke, “in introspective terms, the purported distinct impressions seem to be fictions” (“Hume’s Volitions,” 74).<sup>7</sup>

The second version of this argument is from Bruce Aune. That the impression of will is not introspectible is, for Aune, a significant problem: “The main difficulty . . . is that most of us are simply not aware of any distinctive impression whenever we consciously do something, or make some movement voluntarily. On introspective grounds such impressions seem to be fictions” (*Reason and Action*, 50).<sup>8</sup> The present criticism, though it reaches a conclusion similar to that advanced by Bricke, does not depend on ascribing to Hume a claim as demanding as the prominence thesis. The relevant problem, as it seems to me, concerns the familiarity thesis, or the claim, often attributed to Hume, that tokens of the impression of will are readily discoverable by means of introspection. For this claim, though it is less burdensome than the prominence thesis, is still vulnerable to counterexample. Here, too, it is possible to identify ordinary cases of voluntary action in which we do not find a readily discoverable experience of willing an act. When I raise the cup of coffee and take a sip, I am typically unaware of my having an experience of

volition. And such an experience is not turned up by a cursory survey or a casual inspection of interior events. I find that I simply take a drink and return the cup to the table. Therefore the success of Aune's criticism relies on an introspectibility claim—the familiarity thesis—that is routinely ascribed to Hume as part of the standard interpretation.

### **3.1. An Alternative Thesis about Introspectibility**

These criticisms from Bricke and Aune would seem to be motivated by Hume's general view of impressions. For Hume often suggests that impressions are by their very nature "clear and evident" (T 1.2.3.1; SBN 33), "clear and precise" (T 1.2.1.7; SBN 72), and "strong and sensible" (EHU 7.4; SBN 62). If Hume takes such characterizations to apply to *all* impressions, then, with respect to the impression of will, he is clearly committed to either the prominence thesis or the familiarity thesis. A response to the readings from Bricke and Aune must demonstrate that Hume is not committed to the degree of introspectibility that they attribute to him. When Bricke and Aune argue, on the basis of what is actually revealed by introspection, that the impression of will is a fiction, they are effectively arguing that Hume is committed to a stronger degree of introspectibility than is justified by ordinary experience.

However, as I will argue, it is open to Hume to endorse the following introspectibility claim:

The LATENCY THESIS holds that the impression of will is a *latent* and, in ordinary cases, an at best *potentially introspectible* feature of voluntary action brought into focus only in those instances in which we exercise extraordinary introspective care.

The latency thesis is less burdensome than both the prominence thesis and the familiarity thesis. Unlike the prominence thesis, it does not require that every token of this impression be psychologically inescapable. And, unlike the familiarity thesis, it does not even require that this impression achieve a degree of salience that might otherwise make it noticeable in ordinary cases of reflecting on our experience of voluntary action. For the latency thesis maintains that the impression of will is, all things being equal, discoverable only in those cases in which an agent, rather than making a cursory survey or undertaking a casual inspection of interior events, reflects assiduously and with extraordinary care. If it can be demonstrated that the latency thesis is compatible with Hume's general view of impressions, then the fact that the experience of volition is not readily introspectible does not necessarily entail that the impression of will is a mere fiction.

The latency thesis, in my estimate, is a highly plausible view. If we assume that we have an experience of willing an act, then this seems like the right position to

hold with respect to its introspective availability. The latency thesis is advanced by some contemporary action theorists, especially those who take us to have an experience of willing an act. Carl Ginet, for example, maintains that the experience of volition, even in ordinary cases, is such that “it is easy to be blind to it” (*On Action*, 24). A similar view is expressed by Thomas Metzinger who notes that “the conscious experience of willing something is not as crisp and vivid as, say, the conscious experience of seeing colors or of feeling pain” (“Conscious Volition,” 19). Metzinger adds: “willing something . . . can be a rather subtle and vague inner process, and at times the fact that one is currently willing something can even be introspectively overlooked” (20).<sup>9</sup> According to the latency thesis, the experience of willing an act, while in principle discoverable by means of introspection, is neither psychologically inescapable nor readily discernible. When I take a sip of coffee and return the cup to the table, my attention is ordinarily devoted to chunkier performative aspects of these actions, such as not spilling the coffee, or to features of my environment, such as a conversation or newspaper article. I do not ordinarily catch sight of the fact, even upon reflection, that willing an act has a particular phenomenological quality. However, what is plainly true with respect to our experience of ordinary voluntary actions is compatible with the possibility of carefully disentangling the feeling of willing an act from other concurrent experiences. It may be that pinpointing a unique experience of willing an act requires painstaking introspection.

### 3.2. Impressions and Hume's Introspectibility Commitment

We have reason to believe that Hume does not take every impression to possess the degree of phenomenological robustness ascribed to him by the prominence and familiarity theses. For Hume grants that some impressions are “faint and low” (T 1.1.1.1; SBN 2) or “faint and obscure” (T 1.3.13.19; SBN 154). With respect to impressions of reflection, among which is included the impression of will, Hume writes: “the finer sentiments of the mind, the operations of the understanding, the various agitations of the passions, though really in themselves distinct, easily escape us, when surveyed by reflection” (EHU 49.1; SBN 60). Here Hume revisits a topic which he had addressed more thoroughly earlier in the *Enquiry*. The relevant passage runs as follows:

It is remarkable concerning the operations of the mind, that, though most intimately present to us, yet, whenever they become the object of reflexion, they seem involved in obscurity; nor can the eye readily find those lines and boundaries, which discriminate and distinguish them. The objects are too fine to remain long in the same aspect or situation;

and must be apprehended in an instant, by a superior penetration, derived from nature, and improved by habit and reflexion. (EHU 1.13; SBN 13)

Passages such as these help Hume escape a purported difficulty raised by Penelhum: “It is not easy to grasp how a mental item that has a sufficient force or vivacity to qualify for the title of ‘impression’ can yet be in *any* manner imperceptible” (“The Indirect Passions,” 209).<sup>10</sup> Hume maintains that impressions are indeed phenomenologically distinguishable from ideas in that the former are “forceful and vivid,” while the latter are “weak and languid” (T 1.1.1.1.7; SBN 1–2). According to Penelhum, the very fact that an impression is, by definition, “forceful and vivid” entails that it cannot be both in the mind (much less, as Hume says, “intimately present to us”) and something of which we are unaware.

But Hume’s phenomenological distinction between impressions and ideas has no bearing on the issue of introspectibility or, more broadly, on the issue of what perceptions fall within the purview of our conscious awareness. For impressions can be in the mind without our necessarily being aware of them. Hume allows that some impressions, even if they ultimately possess a degree of vivacity in excess of that possessed by ideas, may exist in the mind, as he says, “faintly” or “obscurely,” and so without their being noticed or evidently felt. For example, in the appropriate setting it is possible to focus our attention on the assorted tactile sensations that together constitute the experience of wearing a sock. However, during the course of an average day, especially during moments when we attend to a complex task, these tactile impressions, which are nevertheless occurrent, recede into the background of consciousness to such a degree that we cease to be aware of them. This will hold all the more true in the course of a day for the impressions of reflection which Hume explicitly characterizes as resistant to introspection. These impressions, Hume states, are apprehended by a “superior,” and so extraordinary, level of introspective care, an introspective feat made possible through a regimen of “habit and reflexion.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet there are a few remarkable passages in which Hume speaks with what seems to be tremendous confidence about the discernibility of impressions: “every impression, external and internal . . . appear, all of them, in their true colors” (T 1.4.2.7; SBN 190). According to Hume, “all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness,” and therefore “they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear” (T 1.4.2.7; SBN 190). However, there need not be a conflict between such statements and Hume’s repeated conviction that the variety and concurrency of impressions poses a significant obstacle to “ordering and distinguishing . . . the operations of the mind” (EHU 1.13; SBN 13). For while he correctly diagnoses the introspective challenges that beset any consultation of the mind, Hume’s conceptual empiricism demands that it nevertheless be possible to pin down impressions of a given

kind and submit them to careful examination. For, according to Hume, an idea, at least in principle, can be improved by consulting the impression from which it originates. When Hume speaks confidently of the discernibility of impressions, I believe he has in mind cases in which, having isolated the relevant impression, we may clarify or learn something new about a given concept. Having performed the needed introspective labor, we may now proceed securely with our investigation, since there need arise no further possibility of deception: "Every thing that enters the mind, being in *reality* a perception, 'tis impossible any thing shou'd to *feeling* appear different. This were to suppose, that even where we are most intimately conscious, we might be mistaken" (T 1.4.2.7; SBN 190). These epistemically confident passages, on my reading, are intended to establish the possibility, which Hume needs, of reliably consulting impressions in such a way as to "throw light" on controversial philosophical concepts (EHU 7.4; SBN 62). But such passages do not conflict with his abiding conviction that the task of inspecting impressions of reflection may require diligence and extraordinary introspective care. For, on my reading of Hume, all internal impressions, though potentially introspectible, need not be readily discoverable upon reflection.<sup>12</sup>

Consider Hume's characterization of the "determination of the mind" (T 1.3.12.7; SBN 133). He identifies this internal impression as the experiential origin of the idea of causal power: "This connexion . . . which we *feel* in the mind, this customary transition [from one perception to another] is the sentiment or impression, from which we form the idea of power or necessary connexion" (EHU 7.28; SBN 75). It is an internal impression, "the necessity . . . internally felt by the soul," which Hume takes to be in principle discoverable by means of introspection (T 1.3.14.24; SBN 166). However, Hume stresses that the influence of custom, which is central to his discussion of the origin of the idea of causal power, "operates in so silent and imperceptible a manner, that we are scarce sensible of it" (T 2.1.9.4; SBN 305). Importantly, Hume holds that causal inferences, even those that we employ in navigating the world on a daily basis, are themselves produced by the influence of custom. Such inferences are, according to Hume, "nothing but the effects of custom on the imagination" (T 2.3.1.16; SBN 405). "The mind," Hume writes, "is determin'd by custom to pass from any cause to its effect, and that upon the appearance of the one" (T 1.3.11.11; SBN 128). This "determination," or inference, stems from the experience of two events constantly conjoined which has the following effect on the mind: "Their constant conjunction in past instances has produc'd such a habit in the mind, that it always conjoins them in its thought, and infers the existence of the one from that of its usual attendant" (T 1.3.11.11; SBN 128).

What is interesting about this network of passages is that Hume combines the claim that the influence of custom has a certain phenomenological quality, the claim that this felt quality is ordinarily insensible, and, finally, the claim that we regularly suffer the influence of custom. While Hume takes it to be psychologically

possible to feel the influence of custom, provided we exercise extraordinary introspective care, he also holds that the operation of custom is something of which we are not only often unaware, but which, upon reflection, is “scarcely sensible.” Indeed, according to Hume, the influence of custom “may operate on our minds in such an insensible manner as never to be taken notice of, and may even in some measure be unknown to us” (T 1.3.8.13; SBN 103). Customary transitions, as Hume often claims, carry the mind “insensibly along” from one thought to another (T 1.3.8.2; SBN 98–99); are “so smooth and easy, that we scarce perceive the transition” (T 1.4.6.8; SBN 256); and are conducted with a “gentle and insensible” movement (EHU 5.14; SBN 50).

It is a central tenet of Hume’s theory of causation that causal inferences, not to mention the countless minute inferences from which all assumptions concerning identity and stability are built, are conducted on a strictly associative or customary basis. Hume’s repeated references to the imperceptible nature of these customary transitions enables him to explain how this fact about human psychology can be at once pervasive enough to shape basic metaphysical assumptions about the world and unknown to ordinary individuals and philosophers alike. Yet, in applying the copy principle, it is the felt quality of customary transitions as they are conducted in instances of causal inference that Hume identifies as the relevant experiential origin of the concept of causal power. This is precisely the “determination of the mind” that interests him. It is from this otherwise dim internal experience, according to Hume, “that the ideas of necessity, of power, and of efficacy, are deriv’d” (T 1.3.14.19; SBN 164).

Hume, in discussing the influence of custom, shows a keen sensitivity to ordinary experience. Custom and habit *do* regularly influence our thoughts and shape our actions in ways that may elude detection and even in ways that for some constitutively reflective people may never fully come to light. Hume, as it seems to me, evidently does not subscribe to either the prominence thesis or the familiarity thesis in the case of the internal impression to which he traces the idea of causal power. For endorsing either of these introspectibility claims would commit Hume to the view that the influence of custom possesses, necessarily, a degree of psychological salience which, as evidenced by the above passages, he emphatically denies. The impression he refers to as the “determination of the mind” is discoverable by means of an extraordinary degree of introspective care. It is, for Hume, an internal experience which need not be either psychologically inescapable or readily discoverable by means of introspection. This demonstrates, at the very least, that Hume’s general view of impressions does not harbor an introspectibility commitment such as Bricke and Aune attribute to him as a matter of course. The latency thesis best captures Hume’s introspectibility commitment as it pertains to the “determination of the mind” and to the role of custom in conducting everyday causal inferences. I will argue that it is open to Hume to adopt

the same introspectibility commitment with respect to the impression of will as he adopts with respect to the "determination of the mind."

### 3.3. *Volition and Hume's Introspectibility Commitment*

There are two features of Hume's position that are germane to understanding the degree of introspectibility he assigns to the impression of will. I will begin with the experience of effort. Hume refers to the experience of effort as the experience of "nisus or strong endeavour" and "the sentiment to overcome resistance" (EHU 7.15n13; SBN 67n1). He clearly has in mind the familiar experience of straining to move a heavy object. An experience of this kind is distinctive in the sense that it is either something of which we are immediately aware or something that we could readily discover by means of introspection. I shall take it that if Hume fails to distinguish the impression of will from the experience of effort, then he is committed to an experience of volition that is phenomenologically robust such that he must endorse either the prominence thesis or the familiarity thesis. Of course, Hume acknowledges that some voluntary acts are performed "without any exertion or summoning up of force" (EHU 7.15n13; SBN 67n1). This may seem like a convenient way of establishing that Hume does draw a distinction between the experiences of volition and effort. But matters are complicated somewhat by the second feature of Hume's position. This is his discussion of paralysis.

According to Hume, some circumstances permit us to claim that a person wills a paralyzed limb to move in the same way that someone wills a healthy limb to move. Hume gives an example that is designed to tease out this intuition. He considers someone who suffers an abrupt onset of paralysis: "A man, *suddenly* struck with a palsy in the leg or arm" (EHU 7.13; SBN 66; my emphasis). Hume's focus is on what this person experiences immediately after this change in her limb. Hume claims that a person in such circumstances "frequently endeavours, at first, to move [these limbs], and employ them in their usual offices" (EHU 7.13; SBN 66). Hume seems to be describing an attempt that precedes or contributes in some way to the discovery that a limb is paralyzed. So we have a case in which a person may be aware of *some* change, but is not yet aware that the relevant change is the onset of paralysis. This person attempts to will her limb to move as she ordinarily would, that is, under the assumption that the limb functions properly. Hume holds that this attempt constitutes a legitimate instance of willing, or an instance of willing that resembles the experience of volition in ordinary cases. But note that the person in this example, who, so far as Hume is concerned, *wills* a paralyzed limb to move, is described as "endeavouring" to move it.<sup>13</sup> Therefore it is possible that Hume, in accordance with either the prominence or familiarity theses, takes the experience of willing a limb to move to be the same as or perhaps something like the distinctive and readily introspectible experience of physical exertion.

However, in reading this passage it is important to note that Hume's example, which explicitly concerns being "suddenly struck with a palsy" or having "newly lost [a] member," is intended to hold equally well in the case of amputation (EHU 7.13; SBN 66). This is significant in that it surely holds in the case of abrupt amputation that, while someone may will this limb to move, it is impossible to put forth physical effort in the attempt to move it. There are no muscles to exert and there is no arm whose weight might require effort to lift. I suggest that we should understand Hume's appeal to paralysis as one that strictly parallels the circumstances of amputation. If I am right about this, then the term "endeavour," as it occurs here, is equivocal. Whatever the person in Hume's example may experience when she wills her paralyzed or amputated limb to move, it is an experience that he implicitly distinguishes from the experience of effort.<sup>14</sup>

Bricke finds the prospect of such a distinction problematic. He argues that if "Hume distinguishes . . . volitions from the feelings that at times accompany their formation," then it follows, with respect to the claim that we have an impression of will, that "there is little to this line of thought" (*Mind and Morality*, 53). Bricke, who, it seems, takes "a feeling of 'nisus or strong endeavour'" to be in some way inextricable from Hume's impression of will, raises a problem he takes to follow specifically from drawing a sharp distinction between the experiences of volition and effort (*Mind and Morality*, 53n18). The suggestion from Bricke, as I understand it, is that Hume must assign a degree of introspectibility to the impression of will that is at the very least on par with what is felt in experiences of physical exertion. For, the suggestion from Bricke continues, an impression of will which falls short of the psychological prominence enjoyed by ordinary experiences of physical exertion would amount to a qualitatively empty impression. But the entailment posited by Bricke does not hold. Hume can maintain that the impression of will is a phenomenologically thin and, in ordinary cases, an at best potentially introspectible internal experience without committing himself to the view that the experience of volition is altogether bereft of qualitative character. If Hume adopts the latency thesis with respect to the impression of will, then, insofar as it is phenomenologically thin, it is an impression that often escapes our notice. Again, if Hume adopts this view, then, insofar as it has *some* experiential character in virtue of which it is an internal experience discriminable from others, the impression of will is something that we, as Hume writes, nevertheless "feel and are conscious of" albeit faintly or indistinctly in ordinary cases of willing an act. Therefore Hume, who, arguably, adopts the latency thesis with respect to certain impressions of reflection and who could assign an equal degree of introspectibility to the impression of will, is not necessarily vulnerable to the objections posed by Bricke and Aune.

#### 4. Temporality and the Impression of Will

Some commentators, granting that we have an experience of volition, take issue with the way in which Hume seems to construe the temporal relationship between the impression of will and the performance of an act. This line of criticism, which is advanced independently of concerns about introspectibility, begins by attributing to Hume the strict priority thesis. According to this thesis, the impression of will, if it occurs at all, occurs prior to the performance of an act such as to lack any degree of simultaneity with voluntary action. The criticism then argues that the strict priority thesis commits Hume to a characterization of volition that bears little fidelity to the ordinary experience of acting voluntarily. Consider the following criticism presented by Mumford and Anjum:

If . . . we applied a Humean model of causation to [action], and the willing was temporarily prior to the act, then the cause will have been fully exercised in the act of will, which was already completed, and would have its constantly conjoined effect after the willing had occurred. But . . . we know this is psychologically implausible. (*Getting Causes from Powers*, 207)<sup>15</sup>

I believe, along with critics of Hume, that the strict priority thesis does indeed result in an implausible view of volition. We can demonstrate as much by slightly modifying Hume's own paralysis example. Instead of thinking about what it would be like to will an already paralyzed limb to move, consider what it would be like to will a limb to move whose paralysis is introduced during the performance of an act. And suppose, in accordance with the terms of Hume's example, that paralysis is introduced without the subject realizing there has been any change with respect to the functioning of her limb. If the strict priority thesis is true, then the experience of volition could not possibly occur in this intermediate phase of the voluntary act. For the experience of willing would have occurred in its entirety before the action got underway. But this seems odd. For it is reasonable to think that the experience of volition, assuming that the person in our example is introspectively adept, will emerge in the course of performing an act just as clearly as it does in Hume's original telling of the example. The subject, who is in the process of raising her arm, will find herself upon the abrupt introduction of paralysis, even if only for a moment, *willing* the continued performance of this act.

##### 4.1. An Alternative Thesis about Temporality

The modified version of Hume's paralysis example is intended to help us spell out a certain intuition about voluntary action. This modified example suggests that if we accept the view that we have an experience of volition, then we should reject the strict priority thesis in favor of the following claim about temporality:

The CONTINUITY THESIS holds that the experience of volition, once voluntary action has been initiated, accompanies an act for the duration of its performance.

This claim is widely endorsed within the theory of action. For example, Ginet distinguishes the experience of volition from what he refers to as “a single-shot mental act” (*On Action*, 32). Hugh McCann, furthermore, distinguishes the experience of volition from “a momentary ‘click’ that *precedes* the bodily change associated with action” (*The Works of Agency*, 140). McCann holds that volition is “ongoing” at least insofar “as there are exertional changes to be brought about as a means to an action’s performance” (140). Mumford and Anjum are among those who take the continuity thesis to be true. They write: “Your deliberate raising of your arm must continue all the way through the process of your arm rising . . . until the arm is as fully raised as you want” (*Getting Causes from Powers*, 206). Let us note that the continuity thesis, despite iterations referring to “exertional” and “deliberate” changes, is compatible with a distinction between the experiences of volition and effort. For it will still be true, according to the continuity thesis, that effortless acts, including those conducted with anaesthetized limbs, are volitionally sustained for the duration of their performance.<sup>16</sup>

Mumford and Anjum take issue with Hume because the strict priority thesis, as they understand it, prevents him from conceiving of volition as something that has any continuity with action. We cannot defend Hume against this line of criticism by challenging the continuity thesis. Because, assuming that we have an experience of willing an act, the continuity thesis seems like the right way to construe the temporal relationship between volition and action. Therefore a response to the criticism hinted at by some and explicitly raised by Mumford and Anjum must challenge the strength of Hume’s commitment to the strict priority thesis. It is tempting to think that an empiricist such as Hume would reject this temporality claim and favor an impression of will whose temporal aspect has greater experiential support. But the text is not decisive on this point. I believe the most that can be established, a view for which I will presently argue, is that neither Hume’s descriptions of voluntary action nor his theory of causation necessarily commits him to the strict priority thesis.

#### ***4.2. Causation and Hume’s Temporality Commitment***

Hume employs two arguments that might be taken to draw upon the strict priority thesis. These arguments occur in various stages of development throughout his writings, but they find their highest concentration and fullest expression in the first *Enquiry*. Both are intended to demonstrate that it is impossible to derive the traditional philosophical conception of causal power from a consideration of voluntary action.<sup>17</sup> Here Hume is criticizing the view that the idea of causal

power “arises from reflecting on the operations of our own mind, and on the command which is exercised by the will, both over the organs of the body and faculties of the soul” (EHU 7.9; SBN 64). For, according to Hume, what is found wanting in voluntary action is precisely the type of necessity that is constitutive of the traditional way of thinking about causal relations. The relationship between volition and action, Hume argues, cannot possibly license a deductive inference from one to another. The first of these, Hume’s incomprehensibility argument, holds that the causal mechanism presumed to be operative in voluntary action is incomprehensible such that neither empirical investigation nor philosophical insight discovers a metaphysically necessary connection between volition and action. The other argument, his separability argument, holds that volition and action are separable such that no conceptually necessary connection obtains between them. Both of these arguments, as I will attempt to show, are compatible with the continuity thesis.

Hume offers several different versions of the incomprehensibility argument. However, there is a specific instance of this argument that would seem to either depend on or reveal a commitment to the strict priority thesis. As with other versions of this argument, what interests Hume is the anatomical complexity of ordinary voluntary acts: “the immediate object of power in voluntary motion, is not the member itself which is moved, but certain muscles, and nerves, and animal spirits, and, perhaps, something still more minute and more unknown, through which the motion is successively propagated” (EHU 7.4; SBN 66). For example, when, with the intention of lifting it off the table, I thread my index and middle fingers through the handle of the coffee mug, my volition in this case introduces countless unknown physiological changes in my body. My explicit intention may be to squeeze my index and middle fingers around the handle of the mug. But the performance of this simple act subsumes many other unseen anatomical events. Hume revisits this description shortly thereafter and offers, some might say tellingly, the following characterization: “Here the mind wills a certain event: Immediately another event, unknown to ourselves, and totally different from the one intended, is produced: This event produces another, equally unknown: Till at last, through a long succession, the desired event is produced” (EHU 7.4; SBN 66). This passage may be taken to suggest that Hume regards volition as something that merely precedes a series of subsequent events whose cumulative effect is the intended act rather than as something that accompanies a voluntary act for the duration of its performance. For it would seem, in accordance with the strict priority thesis, that a single and temporally discrete instance of willing sets in motion minute physiological changes which then bear the relevant causal responsibility for the performance of an act.

In weighing the significance of this passage, it is important to emphasize what Hume intends to establish with this particular characterization of voluntary action.

He is making the point that the causal mechanism presumed to be operative in voluntary action fails to satisfy a certain condition. According to Hume, “when we know a power, we know that very circumstance in the cause, by which it is enabled to produce the effect” (EHU 7.17; SBN 67–68). Elsewhere Hume expands on this condition. If we knew the operation of a power in such a way that it, being the origin of the idea of causal power, both justified the type of necessity philosophers traditionally associate with causation and rendered causal relations as such intelligible, then we would “perceive the very force or energy of the cause, by which it is connected with its effect, and is for ever infallible in its operation” (EHU 7.21; SBN 69). It is with an eye to this condition that Hume, taking full advantage of the anatomical complexity of action, writes: “Can there be a more certain proof, that the power, by which this whole operation is performed, so far from being directly and fully known by an inward sentiment or consciousness, is, to the last degree, mysterious and unintelligible?” (EHU 7.21; SBN 69).

This condition permits Hume to level an insurmountable criticism against the view, advanced by some of his contemporaries, that the idea of causal power stems from a consideration of voluntary action. The causal relation purportedly implicated in voluntary action, for reasons of incomprehensibility, cannot possibly license a deductive inference between two events, much less shed any light on the nature of causal relations generally. This conclusion is readily gained by pointing to the fact that volition, on the assumption that it is causally responsible for the performance of an act, must have as its “immediate object” hidden and unintended physiological changes. I lift the cup of coffee off the table, but, confounding the view to which Hume’s opponent is committed, I perform this act by virtue of an incomprehensible, and so “unknown,” metaphysical relationship.

The strict priority thesis is not required to achieve this polemical aim. For it will still be true, whether Hume takes the experience of volition to either wholly precede or accompany a given act, that the causal mechanism operative in voluntary action is incomprehensible. And this view of the metaphysics of human agency is not diminished by the continuity thesis. Extending the temporal relation between volition and action so as to make them continuous is compatible with Hume’s suggestion that the exercise of volition does not bear a causally perspicuous relation to the performance of an act. The description of voluntary action Hume uses in this and other passages, which may be taken to resemble the strict priority thesis, is intended to highlight the obscurity and complexity of the causal mechanism implicated in otherwise familiar cases of voluntary movement. These descriptions, which I believe are tailored to the various incomprehensibility arguments in which they occur, are not necessarily designed to convey what Hume takes the full experience of willing an act to be like.<sup>18</sup>

I want to turn now to the second argument from Hume that might be taken to depend on a commitment to the strict priority thesis. The central claim of

Hume's separability argument is that volition and action, like any other cause and effect, are in principle separable. He clearly states this claim in the Appendix to the *Treatise* where he writes that, in the case of human agency, "[t]he effect is there distinguishable and separable from the cause" (T 1.3.14.12; SBN 632). This, I believe, is a claim to which his descriptions of voluntary action conform and that his paralysis example is designed to support. We find that Hume describes bodily motion as something that "follows upon the command of our will" (EHU 7.10; SBN 65). Likewise, in the case of mental acts, Hume writes: "We only feel the event, namely, the existence of an idea, consequent to the command of the will" (EHU 7.17; SBN 68). It is true that in these descriptions Hume draws what seems to be a sharp distinction between the "command of the will," regarded as an antecedent cause, and an action, which, when constantly conjoined with the former, is regarded as an effect. But it does not follow from this distinction alone that Hume takes the "command of the will" to be *complete* prior to the performance of an act or to *cease* as soon as voluntary action gets underway. The continuity thesis is compatible with these descriptions of action. For it is not necessary that Hume restrict the "command of the will" to a brief and temporally isolated event.

Looking more broadly at Hume's theory of causation, his claim, which is offered among other heuristics for identifying causal relations, that the "cause must be prior to the effect," in no way depends on the view that a cause ceases to operate once its effect has been brought into existence (T 1.3.15.3; SBN 173). Hume's position does not imply that a table ceases to act as a causal support for a cup of coffee once this effect is brought into existence. It is compatible with Hume's view that we are justified in claiming that the table acts as a cause for as long as the mug is prevented from descending to the floor. We can, according to Hume, claim that gravity is continuously exerted on objects which are thereby "hinder[ed] from mounting in the air" (T 1.4.2.20; SBN 196). We have as much reason to claim that "heat and light are collateral effects of fire" so long as the fire continues to burn (EHU 4.4; SBN 27). These claims about causes operating for certain lengths of time or in conjunction with their effects are justified by experience. And these claims are consistent with Hume's commitment to the view that causes must themselves exist or operate prior to the changes they purportedly bring about.

### 4.3. Volition and Hume's Temporality Commitment

Nevertheless it might be contended, as Mumford and Anjum do, that Hume ultimately *needs* the strict priority thesis in order to establish the controversial claim that volition is separable from action. They suggest not only that the strict priority thesis underlies the "disconnection" of volition and action advanced by Hume, but that adopting the continuity thesis in its place would contribute to the "reunification" of volition and action (*Getting Causes from Powers*, 207–208). If

they are right about this, then it follows, whatever might be said on behalf of the compatibility between the continuity thesis and certain aspects of his theory of causation, that Hume's claim about the separability of volition and action belies a firm commitment to the strict priority thesis.

Yet it is not evident that Hume's claim about the separability of volition and action depends on the strict priority thesis. If it can be shown that the separability of volition and action is compatible with the continuity thesis, then Hume need not assume the truth of the strict priority thesis in order to deduce this manner of separability. As it seems to me, the separability of volition and action *is* compatible with the continuity thesis. Consider two empirical cases. A physician reports the following of a patient whose right leg suffers from anesthesia: "If, when she cannot see the limb she is asked to raise it from the bed, and at the same time movement is prevented, she feels that the movement has been carried out, and will state that the foot is being held 6 in. above the bed" (Martin, "Consciousness and Its Disturbances," 51). The subject's leg does not move despite both willing it to raise six inches above the bed and *continuing* to will the leg to remain at that height. Another study concerns a patient who simply holds up an anesthetized arm. The patient neither sees his arm nor feels sensations of fatigue in the act of holding it up. The limb eventually descends of its own weight. The experimenters report: "If, with his eyes shut, we told him to raise his arm and to keep it up, he did so without trouble. After one or two minutes, however, the arm began to tremble and sink without his being aware of it. He asserted still his ability to keep it up" (James, *Principles of Psychology*, II:1101). The subject in this case, unaware of any change in the position of his arm, *persists* in willing his arm to stay up. Note that the subjects, who in both cases neither see nor feel their limbs, are convinced that they are, for a certain period of time, actively holding their limbs in a specific position. And they are convinced of this despite the fact that their limbs either have not moved at all or have dropped from their intended position. These subjects have little on which to assess whether the intended acts are actually being performed. What, then, explains the mistaken belief that their action *is* going as intended? This is not a question that the researchers attempt to answer. But I take this epistemic feature of these cases to suggest that there was likely *some* experience of willing an act, even if only dimly felt, which indicated, in the absence of countervailing evidence that would have been otherwise visually or kinesthetically apparent, that all was going as it should. Therefore I take these subjects to experience the same sustained volitional contribution that typically accompanies the successful performance of an act. It is on the basis of this experience that they deemed their actions to be successfully and continuously performed.

If I have construed these empirical cases correctly, then they demonstrate that the experience of continuously willing an act *can* be cleanly separated from the actual performance of the intended act. This also brings into question the incom-

patibility Mumford and Anjum take to hold between the continuity thesis and the separability of volition and action. They maintain that the truth of the continuity thesis entails that "one cannot have entirely distinct and separate volitions and bodily movements" (*Getting Causes from Powers*, 208). However, the above empirical cases, at least as I have presented them, demonstrate that the continuity thesis is consistent with the separability of volition and action. Therefore, contrary to the suggestion from Mumford and Anjum, Hume's contention that volition and action are in principle separable does not necessarily reveal a commitment to the strict priority thesis.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper I have focused on the issue of whether Hume is committed to a significant mischaracterization of the experience of willing an act.<sup>19</sup> It remains to be determined just how Hume, in the absence of both decisive textual evidence and impinging theoretical commitments, intends to characterize the impression of will. Yet what I hope we have gained in the present investigation is the conclusion that Hume, despite the way in which his position is standardly interpreted, is not necessarily committed to a view of the impression of will which is readily undermined by ordinary experience. The two lines of criticism considered above, drawing on purported commitments with respect to introspectibility and temporality, make it apparent that the standard interpretation of the impression of will commits Hume to an implausible view of this experience. If the standard interpretation is correct, then Hume's impression of will is certainly problematic. But, as it seems to me, we should reject the standard interpretation.

With respect to the introspective availability of the experience of volition, it is open to Hume to endorse the latency thesis, according to which the experience of volition is phenomenologically thin such that it is brought to light only in those cases in which we exercise extraordinary introspective care. It is an experience that remains latent and at best potentially introspectible in ordinary cases of voluntary action. As I have argued, the introspective demands placed on Hume by the latency thesis are consistent with his theory of impressions. This means that Hume is not necessarily committed to the prominence thesis, which holds that every token of the impression of will is psychologically inescapable. But, turning to the standard interpretation, this also means that Hume is not necessarily committed to the comparatively weaker familiarity thesis, which holds that the impression of will, at least in ordinary cases of voluntary action, is readily identifiable by means of introspection. With respect to the temporal relationship between the impression of will and the performance of an act, Hume, despite what is recommended by the standard interpretation, is under no theoretical pressure to endorse the strict priority thesis, which holds that the experience of volition occurs in its entirety prior

to executing a voluntary act. As I have argued, the continuity thesis, which holds that the experience of volition accompanies a voluntary act for the duration of its performance, is compatible with the basic tenets of Hume's theory of causation, with his descriptions of voluntary action, and, lastly, with his incomprehensibility and separability arguments against the view that the concept of causal power stems from a consideration of human agency. If we, at no small cost to Hume, view the impression of will through the lens of the standard interpretation, then we do so, in my opinion, on the basis of commitments for which there is insufficient evidence and against the grain of his otherwise meticulous descriptions of human psychology.

## NOTES

1 An early version of this paper ("Is Hume's Impression of Will a Fiction?") was presented in 2012 at Dartmouth College for the 6th Margaret Dauler Wilson Biennial Conference. I want to thank the participants for their stimulating questions and comments. During my time at Texas A&M University this project was supported by a grant from the Melburn G. Glasscock Center for Humanities Research. Alison McIntyre graciously agreed to read a draft during my time at Wellesley College. I wish to thank her for her many insights as well as the productive conversation that followed. I also wish to thank the four anonymous referees whose comments improved the manuscript. I am especially indebted to the editors of *Hume Studies* who have generously and patiently encouraged this project throughout its gestation: Corliss Swain, Saul Traiger, Amy Schmitter, Ann Levey, and Karl Schafer.

Citation of Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* is indicated by "T" and includes Book, chapter, section, and paragraph numbers from the 2011 Norton and Norton edition, followed by the corresponding page number, set off by "SBN," from the 1978 Selby-Bigge edition revised by Nidditch. Citation of Hume's *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* is indicated by "EHU" and includes the section and paragraph numbers from the 2000 Beauchamp edition, followed by the corresponding page number, set off by "SBN," from the 1975 Selby-Bigge edition revised by Nidditch.

2 See, for example, Penelhum, *Hume*; Baillie, *Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hume on Morality*; Pitson, "Liberty, Necessity, and the Will"; and Magri, "Hume on the Direct Passions and Motivation."

3 See Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise*; Aune, *Reason and Action*; Baldwin, "Objectivity, Causality, and Agency"; Bricke, "Hume's Volitions"; Broadie, *The Tradition of Scottish Philosophy*; Hornsby, "Agency and Actions"; Mumford and Anjum, *Getting Causes from Powers*; Penelhum, "Hume's Moral Psychology" and "The Indirect Passions, Myself, and Others"; Schmidt, *Reason and History in Hume*; and Stroud, "'Gilding or Staining' the World with 'Sentiments' and 'Phantasms.'" However, there are what appear to be exceptions. For example, Stalley attributes to Hume the view that "the impression of will must . . . be present on every occasion when we act knowingly" ("The Will in Hume's *Treatise*," 43). A similar claim is found in Bricke: "one is immediately aware of

[such impressions] in one's every voluntary action" (*Mind and Morality*, 53). I believe that the apparent strength of these claims (the use of the term *every*) is mitigated by an implicit limitation to ordinary cases of voluntary action. And if they are not, then they should be. Note that ordinary circumstances are appropriate to Hume's view, since, strictly speaking, his description of the impression of will does not require him to hold that this impression must occur in every instance of voluntary action. We can conceive of someone who acts voluntarily and believes she acts voluntarily but for whom, given a certain neurological disorder, an impression of will does not reliably occur in connection with voluntary action. It is compatible with Hume's view that such a person, though she may act voluntarily, would not always have within her the experience of volition he associates with typical cases of willing an act.

4 There are numerous other instances in the literature. Anscombe and Geach write that "the 'internal impression' of will is *followed* by the event willed" (*Three Philosophers*, 107; my emphasis). Stalley takes the impression of will to be an experience "that *precedes* all our voluntary acts" and that, in the case of motion, is then "*followed* by an appropriate movement of the body" ("The Will in Hume's *Treatise*," 48–49; my emphasis). Lowe attributes to Hume the view that "our volitions tend to be *followed* by events realising the intentional contents of those volitions" (*Locke on Human Understanding*, 192; my emphasis). Baillie claims that, according to Hume, the impression of will is a state "in which I see myself as being the cause of *forthcoming* events" (*Routledge Philosophy Guidebook to Hume on Morality*, 42; my emphasis); and is "a perception that immediately *precedes*" our actions (68; my emphasis). Finally, Allison states that, according to Hume, "All that we are ever conscious of is a decision (or act of will) *followed* by a motion of a limb, or a 'command of the will' to consider some idea, which is *followed* by the appearance before consciousness of this idea" (*Custom and Reason in Hume*, 184; my emphasis).

5 What I regard as the standard interpretation is ultimately an assemblage of those three claims we most often find attributed, tacitly and otherwise, to Hume in the literature: the generality thesis, the familiarity thesis, and the strict priority thesis. I take this to be the standard interpretation even though we rarely, if ever, encounter a single reading of Hume's impression of will so thorough as to explicitly entertain all three of these claims.

6 Bricke writes, "I shall take it that Hume denies the possibility of volitions of which one is not conscious" ("Hume's Volitions," 73). Here, to be clear, I take Bricke to deny the possibility of a volition of which one is not immediately or distinctly aware.

7 Note, however, that Bricke takes it to be possible to offer a "compelling case" for the existence of volitions (*Mind and Morality*, 53). The problem is that we cannot argue for a view of volition such as is attributed to Hume on this reading.

8 Aune does not take this objection to "prove that there is no such thing as willing" (51). The problem, as Aune states, is that "if there is such a thing as willing, it cannot be characterized by Hume's definition" (51).

9 See also Bayne: "it is common for agentic experience to be described as recessive—as typically confined to the margins of consciousness" ("The Phenomenology of Agency," 184). Worth noting as well is the following passage written by the sixteenth-century physician, Fernel: "At times this command of the will is obvious, but usually is so im-

perceptible and rarefied that it escapes us altogether, as in the movement of the eyes and eyelids, in most of the gestures of the head and hands, in the breathing and body jerks of sleepers, to which we seem to pay no attention, or very little" (*Physiologia*, 493).

10 The same problem is raised by Ainslie: "Consider sensations that are dim—the buzz of the lights in my office that I cannot help but hear—or thoughts that are gripping—the intellectual project of understanding Hume's philosophy. If the vivacity of the perception is meant to capture the intensity of the mental content, it seems like the gripping thoughts have far more intensity than the barely heard buzz. And yet the latter, as sensations, are impressions, while the former, as thoughts, are ideas. But impressions are supposed to have more vivacity than ideas" (*Hume's True Scepticism*, 214). Ainslie resolves the problem by attributing to Hume the view that passivity and involuntariness are strictly characteristic of impressions: "The dim buzz of the lights and all other sensings, no matter how faint, count as impressions because we are passive with respect to them, even if their objects do not demand our attention" (214). This solution rests on an interpretation of Hume's theory of impressions unlike my own. Moreover, Ainslie, who claims to have "evaporated" the problem, has given us a solution that works in only a limited number of cases. For we must grant that some ideas are received passively, since not all thought is performed voluntarily. Surely Hume would prefer to retain the distinction between impressions and ideas in such cases without denying, implausibly, that ideas can themselves be characterized by passivity and involuntariness.

11 Ainslie, in his *Hume's True Scepticism*, offers a multifaceted interpretation of introspection in Hume. I believe my presentation of Hume's view of introspection is at least partially consistent with Ainslie's reading. This may be difficult to see, however, since Ainslie employs a Lockean view as a heuristic for clarifying Hume's own position. Ainslie, in his discussion of Locke and Hume, uses the terms "introspection" and "reflection" interchangeably. The Lockean view in question, which incorporates separate claims about reflection and consciousness, can be summarized thusly: reflection is "a form of inner sense" and "consciousness [is] a form of inner awareness both more pervasive than and different from reflection" (110). Consciousness, on this Lockean view, is a "special self-intimating quality of all our mental acts" (120). Reflection, by contrast, requires attention: "Only when we direct our attention inwardly will the impressions from our mental operations affect us. Thus many of us will reflect only intermittently or rarely" (117). Hume, we learn, rejects both of these claims. According to Ainslie, Hume holds that "reflection involves a form of inner *thinking* by means of what he calls 'secondary ideas' of perceptions, rather than a kind of internal *sensing*. And his theory of mind does not have space for a version of Lockian consciousness" (117). I do not wish to speak to the issue of consciousness as it relates to either Locke or Hume. But Ainslie is clearly right to note, as part of Hume's view, that introspection *does* sometimes, if not predominantly, take the form of thinking about inward and outward experiences. Introspection is a type of mental survey rather than itself a source from which the surveyed impressions stem. Arguably, Locke, like Hume, recognizes as much. However, as I wish to emphasize here, we risk losing sight of an important feature of Hume's view of introspection by distinguishing it from the above purportedly Lockean view of reflection. There are times when, without turning our attention inward, we miss or fail to notice otherwise robust internal experiences. And sometimes, looking inwardly in an interrogative fashion, we discover concealed perceptual experiences. Locke, in con-

nection with such cases, may on occasion speak inelegantly about “inner sensation,” but his intention, I submit, is to regard introspection as a possible avenue for internal experience. Consider this passage from his *Essay*: “unless he turn his Thoughts that way, and considers them *attentively*, he will no more have clear and distinct *Ideas* of all the *Operations of his Mind*, and all that may be observed therein, than he will have all the particular *Ideas* of any Landscape, or of the Parts and Motions of a Clock, who will not turn his Eyes to it, and with attention heed all the Parts of it” (II.i.7). Consider, furthermore, the following passage from Locke: “And hence we see the Reason, why ‘tis pretty late, before most Children get *Ideas* of the Operations of their own Minds; and some have not any very clear, or perfect *Ideas* of the greatest part of them all their Lives. Because, *though they pass there continually*; yet like floating Visions, they make not deep Impressions enough, to leave in the Mind clear distinct lasting *Ideas*, till the Understanding turns inwards upon it self, *reflects* on its own *Operations*, and makes them the Object of its own Contemplation” (II.i.8; emphasis added). It may very well be true that Hume rejects the view Ainslie posits as Lockean. (Ainslie, in my estimate, is fair to neither Locke nor Hume.) However, and here is the point I am after, we would be wrong to overlook the fact that Hume uses the term “reflection” in a way that is compatible with cases in which introspection serves to bring into view or into sharper focus an impression which would have passed in obscurity or altogether unnoticed.

12 Ainslie it seems, takes the above epistemologically confident passages to express an unqualified view which he refers to as the “transparency thesis.” Accordingly, Ainslie takes Hume to hold that “we cannot be in error about our sensations, nor overlook them when we have them” (*Hume's True Scepticism*, 56). But Hume, Ainslie continues, also holds that the vulgar take themselves to be in direct contact with objects when, really, they only encounter “an array of tangible and visible points” (69). But, given Hume’s endorsement of the transparency thesis, how, Ainslie asks, “can he also hold that the vulgar take themselves to be in contact with the world?” (56). Ainslie claims to “dissolve” this conflict (62). Yet it seems to me that Ainslie, in facing this issue, quickly abandons Hume’s transparency thesis. For, as I understand Ainslie’s solution, the vulgar, in direct contrast to what is recommended by a strict commitment to the transparency thesis, are simply *unaware* of the associative mechanisms that are responsible for their innumerable beliefs concerning objects.

13 See also Hume’s claim in the *Treatise*: “A person, that has lost a leg or an arm by amputation, *endeavours* for a long time afterwards to serve himself with them” (T 1.3.9.18; SBN 117; my emphasis).

14 This suggests that Hume’s position is in agreement with a distinction drawn by Enc: “the phenomenology of forcing one’s arm unsuccessfully under constraint is very different from trying to raise it when it is paralysed” (*How We Act*, 26n29).

15 See also Baldwin, who attributes the strict priority thesis to Hume and then accuses him of “misconstru[ing] the relation between acts of will and bodily movement” (“Objectivity, Causality, and Agency,” 114).

16 For a lengthier discussion of how to disentangle the experiences of effort from other features of agentive experience, see Wood, “Hume and the Phenomenology of Agency,” 499–501.

17 See Wood, “Hume and the Metaphysics of Agency” for a fuller discussion of these arguments, how they relate to Hume’s theory of causation, and what they mean for his understanding of the basic structure of human agency.

18 For a lengthier discussion of Hume’s commitments with respect to the experience of acting voluntarily see Wood, “Hume and the Phenomenology of Agency.” The standard interpretation of the impression of will is not challenged there. What is challenged, however, is the presumption that Hume is committed to an implausibly thin account of the phenomenology of agency.

19 Note that the criticisms concerning introspectibility and temporality on which I focus in this paper assume that there exists an experience of volition against which we can meaningfully test the merits of Hume’s impression of will. However, it has been argued elsewhere in the literature that Hume’s impression of will is untenable precisely because this assumption is false. For example, Stalley observes: “Hume’s theory of action . . . rests on an empirical falsehood” (“The Will in Hume’s *Treatise*,” 61). The problem raised by Stalley, as I understand it, is that reflection on the experience of voluntary action can *never* reveal an empirical basis for the claim that we have an impression of will. Hence Stalley asserts that “[t]here is no reason to suppose that Hume,” in claiming that we have an impression of will, is motivated by anything other than “theoretical” concerns (61). I have not felt a need to address this line of criticism directly. The empirical cases I have selected to explain and defend Hume’s view are not intended to confirm that we have an experience of volition. However, as it seems to me, the suggestion from Hume as well as others working in contemporary theory of action that *something* experientially unique occurs when we will an act, regardless of whether it is distinctly felt in ordinary cases, has been borne out sufficiently by empirical research to withstand the brusque dismissal underlying Stalley’s objection.

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