

A Philosophical Analysis of David Hume's Notion of Impressions and Ideas

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Abstract

The thrust of this paper lies within the philosophical analysis of David Hume's notion of impressions and ideas. Impressions as Hume argues, are immediate and vivid sensations while ideas are faint images of impression present in our thinking and reasoning which provides us with the knowledge of experience. This work seeks to address the problem of how we can have knowledge of ideas that are not based on direct sense impression and experience, and how our sensory impressions relate to the ideas we form in our mind. This work is guided by the objectives of examining the nature of Hume's impressions and ideas, and understanding the role of impressions and ideas in knowledge formation. The study, which is significant from both a theoretical and practical standpoint, explains how impressions and ideas play a fundamental role in shaping our experience of the world. The method this research adopts is analytic method, this method helps to properly analyse how impressions and ideas connects together to form knowledge from Hume's view. This research finds that through sense experience, we learn things about the physical world, but our knowledge does not end there and there is need to further develop our sense data. It is the conclusion of this paper, while empirical knowledge is certainly important, it is limited in its scope and may not be able to provide a complete understanding of a complex phenomenon which may require other forms of knowledge.

Keywords: Impression, Ideas, Consciousness, Subjective, Observation, Experience.

Introduction

In philosophy, there are two major schools of thought that discussed about knowledge, and they are: empiricism and rationalism. Empiricism holds that knowledge is primarily acquired through sensory experience and observation. Empiricism highlights the importance of empirical evidence and

the scientific method in gaining knowledge about the world. This type of knowledge is also known as *a posteriori* knowledge. *A posteriori* knowledge is empirical, experience-based knowledge. It is knowledge that is learned through experience and observation of the external world.¹ Proponents of empiricism include: John Locke, David Hume, and George Berkeley who emphasised the role of perception and sensory experience in forming our beliefs and acquiring knowledge.

On the other hand, rationalism is of the view that knowledge is obtained through reason and rational thought. This school of thought emphasises the importance of logical reasoning in acquiring knowledge. This type of knowledge is also known as *a priori* knowledge. *A priori* knowledge is derived purely from reasoning and logical deductions. The proponents of rationalism include: *Rene Descartes*, *Baruch Spinoza*, and *Gottfried Leibniz*. They believe that knowledge is acquired through reason alone, independent of any sensory experience.

This research tries to address the problem of how we can have knowledge of things that are not directly present to our senses. Also, this work tries to solve the problem of how our sensory impressions relates to the ideas we form in our mind. This directly leads us to thoroughly examining the nature of Hume's impressions and ideas in order to understand the role they play in knowledge formation. This consequently leads us into identifying the strength and weaknesses of Hume's philosophy of impressions and ideas and see how they can best be addressed.

Hume's Notion of Impressions and Ideas

David Hume was an influential Scottish philosopher and historian of the 18th century. He was born on May 1711 in Edinburgh, Scotland, and was also known for his approach on empiricism. In 1748 Hume published the *Philosophical Essays Concerning Human Understanding* (later called *An Enquiry Concerning Human*

¹. Saville, Alicia, *Empirical Knowledge: What It Is, Features and Types*. (Psychred Ltd., 2023), 2.

Understanding). In 1739, Hume wrote *A Treatise of Human Nature*. In this book, Hume presents his theory of epistemology wherein he divides perceptions into 'impressions' (corresponding to feeling or experience) and 'ideas' (corresponding to thinking). Hume thus asserts that:

Here therefore we may divide all the perception of the mind into two classes or species. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated thoughts and ideas. The other species want a name in our language, and in most other; I suppose, because it was not requisite for any but philosophical purposes, to rank them under a general term or application, let us, therefore, use a little freedom, and call them impressions employing that word in a sense somewhat different from the usual.²

He also distinguishes between 'simple' and 'complex' perceptions. With this terminological apparatus in hand, Hume is then able to formulate the most fundamental principle of his system: the so-called Copy Principle, the principle that every simple idea must be a copy of (that is, must resemble and be causally derived from) a simple impression. It is this that defines him as an empiricist. It states a limit, or rather two limits, on what can be thought.³ In his empirical view, he argues that our perceptions are divided into two namely; impressions and ideas. Impressions are the immediate mental experience such as sensations, emotions and passions. They are vivid and intense and they provide raw materials from which ideas are formed. On the other hand, ideas are representations or faint copies of our impressions. They are not immediate but are results of our impressions which include; thoughts, beliefs, and memories. Impressions are direct experience of the world such as our perceptions of colour, sound, and smell. Ideas are mental representations of impressions that

². Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. Selby-Biggie, L.A. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 18.

³. Harold, Noonan W. *Routledge Philosophy – Guidebook to Hume on Knowledge*. (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2024), 6.

can be remembered, imagined, or thought about.⁴ In other words, Hume believed that our ideas are ultimately based on our impressions, and that we can never have an idea that does not have a corresponding impression. He argued that our beliefs and knowledge claims must be based on sensory experience. His epistemological theory holds that knowledge is obtained through impressions and ideas. While impressions are the mental experience that is derived from the senses, ideas are the reflection of our impressions.

Hume's Copy Principle thus sets Hume a task and provides him with an intellectual weapon. The task is to account for all the ideas that we have in a way that is consistent with it. The role of the Copy Principle as a weapon is described by Hume himself as follows:

When he (Hume) suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it (as is too common) he always asks *from what impression that pretended idea is derived!* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant.⁵

It means every hitherto conceived idea has a corresponding impression. Conversely, Hume equally argues that if this impression is not produced, the idea becomes insignificant. The Copy Principle is not merely the first and one of the most important results of Hume's science and its method. In addition, because impressions effectively constitute or delineate our experience, the claim that all simple ideas derive from simple impressions gives substantial content to Hume's methodological determination to stay within the bounds of experience.⁶

Hume in his empirical approach, rejects innate knowledge,

⁴. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. Selby-Biggie, L.A. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 1-2.

⁵. Harold, Noonan W. *Routledge Philosophy – Guidebook to Hume on Knowledge*, 7.

⁶. Michael, Sunday Sasa. "A Reflection on the Nature and Implications of Hume's Theory of Impression" *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development* Vol.3, no.8 (2020), 123.

which refers to the idea that certain knowledge is inborn in the mind from birth. His skepticism towards reason and innate knowledge led to his empirical view which emphasised the role of sensory experience and observation in the formation of human knowledge. Hume, in his work entitled *A Treatise of Human Nature*, holds that our perceptions are based on impressions and ideas. Impressions are what we sense or perceive when we come across images or object for the first time and it is through these impressions that ideas are derived. Impressions are divided into two kinds and they are; impression of sensation and impression of reflection.⁷ Impressions of sensation arise from the senses which makes us to perceive heat or cold, pleasure or pain, thirst or hunger. On the other hand, impressions of reflection arise from thoughts and reflections of those sensory experience. For example: thinking about the taste of memory associated with an apple is an impression of reflection.⁸

Also, Hume present that there are two kinds of ideas and they are: simple ideas and complex ideas. Simple ideas are the direct and immediate perceptions that we receive through our senses such as the taste of an orange. Simple ideas are copies of simple impressions. Complex ideas, on the other hand, are formed through the combinations of simple ideas.⁹ Complex ideas are more abstract than simple ideas. Complex ideas are made of simple perceptions.

In other words, Hume assert that there is a difference between impressions and ideas. The distinction is based on the degree of force and liveliness with which perceptions strike upon the mind. There is a difference between the sensation of experience of heat, which is an impression, and thinking about the sensation of heat when we are no longer experiencing it, which is an idea.¹⁰ By and large, Hume accepts that there are some

^{7.} Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 7.

^{8.} Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 8.

^{9.} Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 4.

^{10.} Zimeri, Sead. "Impressions and Ideas." *Word Press*. (2009), 8.

instances in which ideas can be as vivid as impressions, and impressions as faint as ideas, and this raises a question on the vivacity of impressions and ideas. However, the fact that at times, the two resemble each other, following vivacity as the distinguishing criterion may lead us into error. This distinction is recognised and best explained by the "Copy Principle". Landy holds that what distinguishes impressions from ideas is not force and vivacity but the copy principle.¹¹ Here, for an idea to be a copy, it must attain the two necessary conditions which are; the first is that the ideas are caused by their corresponding impressions, and the second condition is that ideas should exactly resemble their corresponding impressions. In support of his copy principle, Hume offers an example that when teaching a child the idea of a blue colour, you provide an actual blue object to produce the impressions.¹²

In addition, Hume believes that ideas owes its origin from impressions. Ideas are the representation of impressions in our thinking. This means that it is impressions that produces ideas.¹³ Also, Hume holds that ideas derived from impression are preserved in its original form in the memory. In Hume's view, the memory is the faculty that preserves ideas in the way it is presented. Memory involves the retention of past impressions and ideas, allowing us to recall and reflect on our past experiences.¹⁴

Hume, in his work on *A Treatise of Human Nature*, explains how two ideas are joined which he called "The principle of connexion." He gave three principles of connexion and they are: resemblance, contiguity in time or place, and cause or Effect.¹⁵ The principle of resemblance says that similar things tend to revive one another. The principle of Contiguity or nearness says contiguous

¹¹. Landy, David. "Hume's Impression/Idea Distinction." *Hume Studies*. Vol. 32, Num. 1, (April, 2006), 10.

¹². Zimeri, Sead. "Impressions and Ideas." *Word Press*, 8.

¹³. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 14.

¹⁴. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 9.

¹⁵. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 23.

things tend to revive one another. Lightning revives in us the idea of thunder. And finally, the principle of Causality claims that if two events are connected as cause and effect, then one revives the image of the other.¹⁶ These principles of connexion helps us to connect our ideas, which without them, our ideas will be unconnected.

In essence, impressions form the foundation of our perception by providing us with direct sensory experience, and ideas helps us to interpret our impressions based on our past experiences. Impressions and ideas create our perception of the world, and they influence how we perceive and interpret different situations. Hume's philosophy of impressions and ideas gives a subjective knowledge. Hume believes that since ideas are based on impressions, our knowledge is subjective. This subjectivity that what we know is based on our unique perceptions and experiences, thereby allowing people to have personal experience and interpretation of the world around them. However, "impressions can have the knowable relations as objects in precisely the same way that ideas can, and Hume's justification of the standards of knowledge is perfectly general in that it does not turn on any of the features distinctive of ideas."¹⁷

Critique of Hume's notion of Impressions and Ideas

Despite that Hume's theory of impressions and ideas provides us with knowledge as of experienced, it is important to note that Hume's theory of impressions and ideas is not without flaws. In the view of Lacewing, he disagrees with Hume that all ideas are derived from sense experience. For Lacewing, there are complex ideas that do not correspond to our sense experience such as the idea of unicorns and God. Lacewing also finds that not all ideas

^{16.} Lacewing, Michael. *Hume on the Relation between Impressions and Ideas*, (Routledge: Taylor and Francis Group, 2024). 1-5.

^{17.} Graham, Clay. "Knowledge and Sensory Knowledge in Hume's *Treatise*." *Oxford Studies in Early Modern Philosophy* (Oxford University Press), 6.

are copies of impressions, these ideas that do not come from sense experience are derived from our imagination. Lacewing refutes Hume's origin of ideas, he believes that ideas are coherent and cannot be derived through experience, but have their origins elsewhere. Also, Hume's analysis of complex ideas cannot be used to analyse philosophical concepts like knowledge, truth and beauty.¹⁸ In addition, Hume fails to take cognisance of the possibility of holding knowledge claims that are not derived from the impressions of the external world that is the possibility of knowing without evidential claims correlating to objects in reality.¹⁹

In other words, these ideas that are derived from impressions which Hume proposes seems to be misleading because one might be experiencing hallucinations while he thinks is reality.²⁰ Hume empiricism cannot be proven to be accurate. This is because it often leads to illusion in the sense that one thinks this is reality while it is not. For instance, when one is driving on the road, it might appear to the person that there is a pool of water from a distance but when the person gets closer, the person comes to realise that there is no water. Thus, this impression gives the person a false idea of his environment.

Also, Hume contradicted himself in his view on the relation of ideas. Hume asserts that the class of reasoning about relation of ideas such as mathematics and geometry is necessarily true not by experiment or observation and this is contrary to his tenets of empiricism.²¹ According to Copleston, "Hume account of

¹⁸. Lacewing, Michael. *Hume on the Relation between Impressions and Ideas*, 5.

¹⁹. Olalere, Kunle Oluwafemi and Olupona, Adeola Moromoke. "Of Impressions, Ideas, and Veracity of Memory: A Review of the Humean Epistemological Project." *Global Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Science* 9, no.4 (2021). 1-7.

²⁰. Nwoye, Leonard. "A Critique of Hume's Ethical Empiricism: Towards Addressing Ethical Dilemmas in Making Moral Choices." *An Interdisciplinary Journal of Human Theory and Praxis* 2, no.1 (2018). 13.

²¹. Ezebuilo, Hyginus Chibuike. "The Philosophical Implication of David Hume's Radical Empiricism." *Philosophy and Praxis* 13, no.1 (2023). 149.

mathematics is therefore, rationalist.”²² Copleston further argues that by saying that relation of ideas needs no experience to confirm it does not mean they are innate. He says that they are formal propositions and not empirical hypothesis.²³

On his part, Michael asserts that Hume's theory of impression reveals that for Hume, without impression, there can be no ideas. It also reveals that impression and ideas constitutes the content of the mind in his thoughts. The major argument against Hume's position is that an idea without impression should not be refuted and dismissed as having no meaning; this argument is hinged on the fact of the existence of a plethora of ideas that have no link with impression. The flaws of Hume's theory notwithstanding, Hume theory of impression is merited in the fact that it served to sustain the discourse on knowledge even to the enlightenment period.²⁴

The Epistemological Implication of Hume's Theory of Impressions and Ideas

Hume's theory of impressions and ideas has significant epistemological implications as it challenges traditional views on the nature and understanding of knowledge. For Hume, knowledge is based on our impressions and our ideas are derived from those impressions. By emphasising the role of impressions and the importance of empirical experience, Hume's theory suggests that knowledge is only based on sense perceptions and experiences.

Hume stated that all knowledge can be traced back to either matters of fact or relations of ideas. Matters of fact are empirical claims that is based on experience and observation. Relations of

^{22.} Copleston, Fredrick. *A History of Philosophy*. V. (London: Burns and Oats Ltd., 1954). 274.

^{23.} Copleston, Fredrick. *A History of Philosophy*, 274.

^{24.} Michael, Sunday Sasa. “A Reflection on the Nature and Implications of Hume's Theory of Impression” *Journal of African Studies and Sustainable Development*, 138.

ideas, on the other hand is based on logical connection or deduction. Hume believes that reason alone cannot decide whether a factual statement is true or false and we have to recourse to experience. He asserts that reason cannot tell us anything about matters of fact. For him, we cannot have any knowledge about the world of nature, independent of experience, even with our rational faculties. According to Hume, Adam- the first man according to the biblical account, with his rational faculties, would not have known the workings of nature by any pre-experiential means.²⁵

In addition, Hume's empiricism profound great implication for scientific knowledge. His emphasis on experience and observation influences scientific knowledge. This means that scientific knowledge must be based on evidence gathered through observation and experimentation, rather than abstract reasoning or intuition. Hume is most respected for his use of logic, consistent argument, a powerful writer, but not on the search for the "real" Hume wears his shoes so he knows where it pinches. He might have recognized this when he said, "Be a philosopher; but amidst all your philosophy, be still a man."²⁶

The Subjectivity of Knowledge in Hume's Empirical Philosophy

David Hume's empirical theory profound subjective knowledge. Subjective knowledge is knowledge that is based on personal experience, beliefs, perspective, and prejudices. It is derived from our emotions and it varies from person to person. Hume believes that impressions are what we sense or perceive when we come across images or objects for the first time and it is through these impressions that ideas are derived.²⁷ Hume's theory of impressions and ideas denotes subjective knowledge whereby experience

^{25.} Ezebuilo, Hyginus Chibuike. "The Philosophical Implication of David Hume's Radical Empiricism." *Philosophy and Praxis*, 13, no.1 (2023). 146-158.

^{26.} Udoh, Moses. "David Hume's Theory of Knowledge: An Exposition & Evaluation." *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts AKSUJA* Vol 5, no. 1 2024, 171.

^{27.} Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 7.

differ from person to person. Impressions and ideas give people different knowledge based on their unique experiences.

In Hume's impression of beauty, he considered beauty as such that is placed upon something that is related to us.²⁸ This illustrates that when we encounter something that we find beautiful, we have a subjective experience. Here, what one finds beautiful, another may not find it appealing at all. Our beliefs about beauty are therefore shaped by our individual perception which makes them subjective in nature.

Also, Hume's distinction between moral good and evil underscores subjective knowledge. Hume believes that morality is influenced by human passions and actions.²⁹ Moral distinction such as good and evil are not based on reason or objective standard, but rather on sentiments, emotions, and feelings. In Hume's philosophy, moral judgments are based on personal experience, cultural norms which may differ from person to person and from society to society. Here, what one considers to be a morally good action, another person might view it as morally wrong based on their personal values and beliefs. In other words, subjectivity in Hume's philosophy is ultimately rooted in our perceptions and experiences. Hume fails to consider the prevalence of communal conventional experiences that also form the threshold of our subjective experience

Conclusion

There are strength and weakness associated with Hume's theory of impressions and ideas. The strength of David Hume's philosophy of impressions and ideas lies in the view that Hume emphasis on the importance of sensory experience as the foundation of knowledge, which places a high value on observation and experience in the formation of beliefs. His emphasis on experience and observation influences the scientific method by asserting that knowledge should be based on evidence

²⁸. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 279.

²⁹. Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 457.

from experience. Hume's empiricism laid a foundation for the empirical approach to scientific inquiry. Impressions and ideas influence how we perceive the world, interact with others and respond to situations. It gives us a subjective knowledge of things as it is experienced firsthand. Thus, impressions and ideas constitute the basic contents of our consciousness.

On the contrary, Hume's empiricism underestimates the role of reason in human cognition. This is because despite the fact that knowledge can be derived from experience, it is not all knowledge that is circumscribed within sensory experience, but is moved to the faculty of reason for a more rational development of knowledge. Also, reliance on sensory experience as a source of knowledge can be misleading. Hume's empiricism is argued to often lead to illusion and his view that all ideas are derived from experience is consequently incorrect. This is because it is not all ideas that are derived from experience. The ideas of unicorns and God do not correspond to our experience.

Hume's Theory of knowledge has been widely criticized by Philosophers even of the contemporary era, yet the issue he raised continues to be very relevant.³⁰ Hume's philosophy of impressions and ideas highlights the importance of observation and experience in our acquisition of knowledge. It emphasise subjective knowledge. His empirical theory has a profound impact on the development of Western philosophy, by challenging the traditional notions of knowledge. However, through sensory experience, we learn about the physical world, but our knowledge do not end there. This means that there is need for further processing of our sense data which is the most important aspect of knowledge. While empirical knowledge is certainly important, it is limited in its scope and may not be able to provide a complete understanding of complex phenomena and may require other forms of knowledge.

³⁰. Udoh, Moses. "David Hume's Theory of Knowledge: An Exposition & Evaluation." *Akwa Ibom State University Journal of Arts AKSUJA*, 171.

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