

“Belief is a term so familiar, as to have escaped the inquiry of all philosophers, except the author of the treatise of human nature.” - Henry Home, Lord Kames¹

Hume on Belief²

Accounting for belief is at the very center of some of the most important passages in Book 1 of the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry*. Beliefs, Hume tells us, are products of the understanding, in contrast to the mere fictions of the imagination. Belief “peoples the world” and put us in touch with “such existences, as by their removal in time and place, lie beyond the reach of the sense and memory.”³ (1.3.9.4) Our beliefs issue from causal inference, and it is the analysis causal inference which Hume, and many of his readers, take to be a singular contribution to philosophy. Thus to study Hume on belief is to study many central claims and arguments; it is difficult to carve off a bite-size topic. That said, I’m going to try to isolate one issue, aware that it ultimately connects up to many others. I’m interested in the *scope* of the phenomenon of belief for Hume. The questions that arise include these: Are beliefs formed only through causal inference, or can other items count as beliefs? Do of our ideas of the imagination, those whose vivacity is acquired not through causal inference but by “other relations and other habits” count as beliefs? (1.3.9) Are impressions beliefs for Hume? Do we “believe with our eyes”? Are memories beliefs? In what follows I will restrict my attention to just one of these questions, the question of whether our impressions ever count as beliefs.

The question of the status of impressions is motivated first by the texts. But the relevant texts are not easy to reconcile. In some places Hume seems to restrict beliefs to being lively ideas related to present impressions. In other places Hume appears to present that definition as covering just one type of belief. In still other passages it looks like Hume explicitly countenances impressions as beliefs. Commentators are all over the map, from those who charge Hume with inconsistency, to those who insist that impressions are beliefs to those who hold that they can’t be.⁴

Another motivation is the desire to understand the epistemic status of impressions for Hume, and their relation to the paradigmatic cases of belief. We *infer* beliefs from present impressions, under the right circumstances. Inferring beliefs from other beliefs is easy. But if impressions aren’t beliefs, then we’re inferring beliefs from something that doesn’t count as belief. That’s not so easy. One tradition in Hume scholarship takes Hume to be a foundationalist. Impressions and

1 Home, Henry, Lord Kames, 1751, reprinted in Fieser, James, ed. 2000, p. 120.

2 To be presented at the 35th International Hume Conference, Akureyri, Iceland, August 5, 2008 in a panel on belief with co-panelists Miriam McCormick and Corliss Swain. I’m grateful to Miriam and Corliss for comments and suggestions on this material, as well as for access to drafts of their presentations.

3 All references to Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Hume, Norton and Norton, eds. 2007) are of the form book.part.section.paragraph. References to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (Hume, Beauchamp, ed., 1999) are of the form section.part.paragraph.

4 Cf. Hodges and Lachs, 1976, Kamooneh, 2003,

memories form the foundation of our “knowledge.” As such, they must be beliefs, foundational beliefs which are non-inferentially known. Does Hume take us to have such non-inferential conviction based on introspective awareness of sense-contents, for example? It sounds like it when he says “The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, which being immediately present to us by consciousness, command our strongest assent, and are the first foundation of all our conclusions.”⁵ (1.4.2.47) The foundationalist reading, while getting some support from the text, would land Hume’s epistemology in considerable difficulties. Though many of those difficulties have only been fully formulated in the context of criticizing twentieth century foundationalism, I’ll argue that Hume’s nuanced account of the role of impressions in belief formation is not subject to them, and to put it more forthrightly, is in fact sensitive to such criticisms.⁶

Closely allied with the foundationalist reading is a sceptical one. According to some interpreters, Hume is a sceptic about the existence of the external world because the inferences to the existence of such a world lack the certainty possessed by our beliefs based on the deliverances of our senses. Don Baxter suggests that such a reading might help us appreciate the Pyrrhonian antecedents of Hume’s philosophy.⁷

In the *Treatise* the issue of the epistemic status of impressions arises at the very start of Hume’s attempt to explain causal inference. Though reasoning from cause and effect takes us “beyond those objects” which we see or remember, we “must never lose sight of them entirely.” (1.3.4.1) Hume appears to offer a version of the epistemic regress argument: We may make inferences from the conclusions of other causal inferences, but we can’t do that “*in infinitum*; and the only thing that can stop them, is an impression of the memory or senses, beyond which there is no room for doubt or enquiry.” (1.3.4.1) If the regress described here is a *justificatory* regress, then the impressions which serve as stopping point ends the regress of reasons and hence must count as beliefs.

I have argued elsewhere that we ought not interpret the claim here that causal reasoning stops in impressions as a claim about the justification of belief, but rather as the beginning of Hume’s treatment of belief formation.⁸ The regress is not a justificatory regress, and here’s why: The example Hume cites as evidence for the claim that our inferences can’t go on *in infinitum* is our belief that Caesar was killed on the Ides of March. The stopping point for this belief are our impressions of words and utterances of others. But as an astute analyst of the phenomenon of credulity in this very part of Book 1, Hume certainly does not regard impressions of testifiers as

5 Though Hume does not single out impressions in this passage.

6 A main worry is about the dual roles that foundational beliefs must play as both causal and conceptual factors in knowledge. If the foundational elements are beliefs, then they must be conceptual. But if they are conceptual, it isn’t clear how they can be foundational. Cf. Sellars, 1963.

7 Cf. Baxter, 2007, unpublished. I commented on Baxter’s paper at the 2007 Hume Conference. Working through Baxter’s claims about our “passive acquiescence” to appearances helped suggest a paper on the epistemic status of impressions.

8 Traiger, 1993

providing the foundational *justification* for our belief. However, as a stopping point in the chain of causes of our belief, the words and utterances of others will do just fine.

Indeed the passage suggests not that impressions are foundational beliefs, but rather that impressions are required for the *formation* of beliefs, and hence are not themselves beliefs. Terence Penelhum put it this way: “Hume has to insist upon the involuntariness of belief, and to represent it as the product of association. He also has to represent it in the language of impressions and ideas. It cannot *be* an impression, since the occasions on which we believe something to be the case are precisely those on which the presence of that in which we believe is *not* certified by an impression.”⁹ Our belief about Caesar’s death is a very clear example of something not certified by an impression, since we have no impressions of Caesar.

Hume contrasts “reasoning” in which beliefs are not formed, hypothetical reasoning from “reasoning” in which we form beliefs. In hypothetical reasoning, there are no founding impressions. In hypothetical arguments, Hume says, there is “neither any present impression, nor belief of a real existence.” (1.3.4.2) This clearly suggests that present impressions and belief (of a real existence) are two different things, and that each are missing from hypothetical arguments. But it also suggests that the presence of *either* impressions or beliefs would make the argument non-hypothetical. So impressions and beliefs can function in a similar way, though they are “materials of a mix’d and heterogenous nature, and which, however connected, are yet essentially different from each other.” (1.3.5.1) It bears repeating: Impressions and beliefs are “essentially different from each other.” It’s not easy to see how Hume can maintain this, in light of what he says almost immediately following. But it’s my task to show that he can maintain that there is an essential difference.

As clearly as Hume emphasizes that the components of causal reasoning are different from each other at the start of 1.3.5.1, much of what follows in that section seems to speak against that very thesis. One of the components of causal inference is memory, and section 5 treats the impressions of sense and memory. The issue here isn’t distinguishing sense impressions from memories, but rather distinguishing memories from high vivacity ideas of the imagination.¹⁰ An idea of the imagination can gain enough vivacity “to pass for an idea of the memory, and counterfeit its effects on the belief and judgment.” (1.3.5.5) It does this in the case of liars, for example, who by the customary repetition of their lies, wind up remembering them “as realities.” Hume writes that in such cases we have a custom and habit that functions much as nature does in ordinary belief formation. (1.3.5.6)

The influence of the custom and habit of liars on the imagination produces high vivacity ideas which are, at least to individual introspection, like memories. When Hume concludes this section, it looks very much like he’s lumping impressions, memories, the high vivacity ideas of liars, and regular beliefs into one basket. He writes:

Thus it appears, that the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and

⁹ Penelhum, 1975, p. 35.; See also Pears, 1990

¹⁰ Many commentators are bothered by Hume’s apparent talk of *impressions* of memory. Yet this worry can be handled. See (Traiger, 2008)

senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination. To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory. 'Tis merely the force and liveliness of the perception, which constitutes the first act of the judgment, and lays the foundation of that reasoning, which we build upon it, when we trace the relation of cause and effect. (1.3.5.7)

Several commentators take this passage as definitively establishing that memories and sense impressions are beliefs.¹¹ On their readings, Hume holds that to remember or sense is to believe, and that on the basis of high vivacity alone. Such beliefs are the “first acts of judgment”, and serve as the grounds for other beliefs. Other high vivacity ideas, even ideas of the imagination, can be beliefs.

There are other passages where Hume characterizes sense impressions as judgments or as involving judgments. In Part 2, Hume says that certain “judgments of our senses” are “infallible,” for example the judgment that an object one foot in length is shorter than something a yard in length. (1.2.4.23) But he also describes judgments of the senses (though he doesn't call them “beliefs of the senses) as “loose and fallible,” (1.3.1.4) noting that our judgments of significant differences are more secure than our judgments of close similarity. When differences in qualities are considerable, Hume says, we can decide this “at first sight, without any enquiry or reasoning.” (1.3.1.2)

Yet is Hume really talking about judgments which just involve *impressions*? The section just cited is “Of Knowledge” and knowledge involves those relations which depend “solely on the *ideas*” (my emphasis). Resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality and proportions in quantity or number are relations of *ideas*, not impressions. Consider how Hume describes resemblance: “When any objects *resemble* each other, the resemblance will first strike the eye, or rather the mind; and seldom requires a second examination.” (1.3.1.2) Hume makes a point of saying that it's not the eye – the impression, but the *mind* – the idea, which provides the basis for the resemblance. As Hume notes at the end of this section, the ideas we relate get their content from our impressions, which are “precise and clear.” But the relations are relations of *ideas*, not impressions, and the judgments, then, are not impressions.

There is much to be explored here in considering what Hume means by “judgment” in the context of knowledge, and how it relates to belief and probability. I think that Hume deliberately avoids the term “belief” in characterizing knowledge. Our beliefs, as matters of probability, don't connect up with the “judgments” of the relations of ideas, at least not until those judgments turn out, in Part 4, to really be matters of probability after all. As David Owen has helpfully pointed out, an essential difference is that judgments formed by relations of ideas are yielded by the content of those ideas, and this is not the case for belief.¹²

¹¹ (Hodges and Lachs, 1976, Waxman, 1993).

¹² (Owen, 2003)

Let's return to 1.3.5.7, the passage in which Hume appears to treat impressions as beliefs. First, if impressions are beliefs, it isn't *all* impressions, but just impressions of sense and memory. I think this shows that it can't just be a matter of vivacity which would make impressions count as beliefs, since *all* impressions, including impressions of reflexion, have high vivacity. Thus when Hume writes "the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present," he can't mean that high vivacity is sufficient for belief. Restricting ourselves to impressions of sense, should we take Hume to be saying that *all* impressions of sense are beliefs? Is an impression of the taste of a pineapple a belief? Should we read the "always" in "the *belief* or *assent*, which always attend the memory and senses" as "all"? Is, then, every itch a belief? I don't think this is what Hume is trying to say.

The passage ends with this: "Tis merely the force and liveliness of the perception, which constitutes the first act of the judgment, and lays the foundation of that reasoning, which we build upon it, when we trace the relation of cause and effect." It's not that force and liveliness of any perception is a belief, but rather the force and liveliness of impressions of sense or memory that are employed in causal inferences constitute the first act of judgment. Only impressions of sense and memory *can* play this role, but not all impressions or memories *will* figure in causal inferences. It is indeed the force and liveliness of impressions of sense and memory which make them apt for playing this role.

The term "constitutes" is important in this passage. In *Treatise* 3.3.5, Hume says that pain or pleasure "which arises from the general survey or view of any action or quality of the *mind*, constitutes its vice or virtue..." (3.3.5.1) Hume isn't saying that pain or pleasure, by itself, constitutes vice or virtue, but rather that it constitutes vice or virtue when it arises from the general survey. I think we have a parallel case in 1.3.5.6. It's force and liveliness of impressions which constitutes "the first act of judgment" when we make causal inference. After saying "Thus it appears, that the *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination," he adds: "To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory." The phrase "in this case" is crucial: When serving as a present impression for causal inference, an impression's vivacity is component in the formation of belief. That's very different from claiming that vivacity alone of an impression makes for belief. [reading of "first *act of judgment* here?]

That impressions of reflexion aren't included among the first acts of judgment requires some explanation. Can an impression of reflexion serve as a present impression? Are there present impressions of reflexion? A present impression follows on a set of constantly conjoined impressions. Are there constant conjunctions of which the first impression in the pair is an impression of reflexion? Could there be a constant conjunction of fear and something, and then a present impression of fear (feeling fear) and then a lively idea of that something which is constantly conjoined with it? Consider someone with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Having experienced the horrors of war, for example, a returned soldier experiences fear and then has lively ideas which represent the kinds of experiences had in combat, where fear and bad things happening were constantly conjoined. That we seem to need to a case such as this is

telling. Our passions are typically *not* connected to beliefs so systematically. Yet our impressions of sensation and memory do have such systematic connections.

Hume's pathological case is that of the coward:

As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions, so the passions in their turn are very favourable to belief; and not only such facts as convey agreeable emotions, but very often such as give pain, do upon that account become more readily the objects of faith and opinion. A coward, whose fears are easily awaken'd, readily assents to every account of danger he meets with; as a person of a sorrowful and melancholy disposition is very credulous of every thing that nourishes his prevailing passion. When any affecting object is presented, it gives the alarm, and excites immediately a degree of its proper passion; especially in persons who are naturally inclined to that passion. This emotion passes by an easy transition to the imagination; and diffusing itself over our idea of the affecting object, makes us form that idea with greater force and vivacity, and consequently assent to it, according to the precedent system. (1.3.10.4)

Note that this shows that passions can play something like the role of a present impression. They can be "favourable to belief." But of course there has to be some content as well, the idea of the "affecting object." It isn't clear that this is just a case of belief formation, or a case of belief enlivened by an accompanying passion.

Hume's fascinating precipice case, the case of a man dangling over a precipice in a cage of iron, is another place to look for insight into the role of impressions of reflexion in the formation of belief. On the precipice, one has a high vivacity idea of danger and descent into the precipice, in conflict with the belief in one's safety secured by chains "of the solidity of iron." (1.3.13.10) I've argued elsewhere that this isn't a case of belief opposing belief, but, more interestingly, a conflict of affect and cognition.¹³ So I don't think we can treat the impression of fear on the precipice as a present impression for the belief that one is in danger.

This suggests that there's something about impressions of sensation and memory which makes them apt for causal inference – a presence or reality, that impressions of reflexion, in spite of their high vivacity, lack. But this seems implausible: What has greater presence than fear? A more promising tack may be to consider what it is that make impressions of reflexion not apt as present impressions in causal inference. I suspect that this has to do with the fact that they are reflective, and therefore idiosyncratic. The sorrowful person will feel sadness easily in response to a great many things. A cheerful person will not. But both will form the lively idea of heat when they have the present impression of flame. That the sorrowful person is sad-sensitive and

¹³ There can be vivacity transfer from passions - like fear - to ideas - like the idea that I'm going to fall in the cage of iron, but that Hume does not describe this as belief. He contrasts this mechanism to the mechanism by which we form the belief in our safety. The two mechanisms are temporarily in conflict, and Hume thinks we can resolve the conflict by recognizing the source of the liveliness of the idea of our danger. See Traiger, 2005.

that the coward is fearful depends on their unique mental histories. Not so for our inferences that flames are hot.

We can say all this without concluding that impressions of sense and memory are beliefs. It's not that impressions of flame are beliefs and feelings of fear aren't. Rather, it has to do with the difference in the way these impressions are introduced to the mind.

In 1.3.9, Hume writes about the relation of impressions of sense and memory as an aggregate to the aggregate of our beliefs:

Of these impressions or ideas of the memory we form a kind of system, comprehending whatever we remember to have been present, either to our internal perception or senses; and every particular of that system join'd, to the present impressions, we are pleas'd to call a reality. But the mind stops not here. For finding, that with this system of perceptions, there is another connected by custom, or if you will, by the relation of cause or effect, ... (1.3.9.3)

The two "systems are explicitly separated. Hume calls one the system of "reality" and the second "realities." Only the second system is the object "of the judgment." (1.3.9.3) Illustrating the second system with beliefs about Rome, Hume concludes: "All this, and everything else, which I believe, are nothing but ideas; tho' by their force and settled order, arising from custom and the relation of cause and effect, they distinguish themselves from the other ideas, which are merely the offspring of the imagination." (1.3.9.4) Beliefs, then, are ideas – not impressions. Impressions and memories are part of the first system; beliefs comprise the second. Though beliefs are ideas, they are high vivacity ideas arising from custom and cause and effect.

Although this is a very clear expression of the separation of belief from impressions, we still have to account for other passages in which Hume appears to equate them. Loeb¹⁴ cites 1.3.10, where Hume describes the effect of belief to "raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions..." (1.3.10.3) Clearly beliefs approach the vivacity of impressions, and they are "equal" to impressions in terms of the influence they have on the will. That doesn't obviate the fact that impressions and beliefs get their vivacity in different ways. Hume writes: "Belief, therefore, since it causes an idea to imitate the effects of the impressions, must make it resemble them *in these qualities*, and is nothing but *a more vivid and intense conception of any idea*." (1.3.10.3, first italics added) Belief resembles impressions in the quality of being a vivid and intense conception. But the distinction remains in light of the difference in the origin of that quality, respectively.

Perhaps we can sum up where we are at this point by saying that the epistemic features of both impressions and beliefs have to do with their respective roles in causal inference. Impressions are "first acts of judgment" when causal inferences are founded on them. Lively ideas related to such present impressions (and the constant conjunctions which precede them) are beliefs. Neither impressions nor beliefs have the epistemic features they have merely in virtue of their

¹⁴Loeb, 2001, p. 291.

vivacity. Impressions and beliefs are distinguished by their roles in inference. We don't infer impressions of sensation or memory.¹⁵ But we can use beliefs as the basis for inference to other beliefs. And both beliefs and impressions play a role in action, though Hume emphasizes that the difference in origins of each matters a great deal.¹⁶

In often-cited passage, Hume denies the *possibility* of knowledge of the causes of our impressions of sense.

As to those *impressions*, which arise from the *senses*, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being. Nor is such a question any way material to our present purpose. We may draw inferences from the coherence of our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses. (1.3.2.2)

One reading of this passage takes Hume to be denying demonstrative knowledge of the causes of our impressions, but not denying the possibility of probable belief. I think this is correct, but that Hume's point is a deeper one. Impressions of sense are original. So there are no antecedent perceptions from which we can infer their causes. But this doesn't preclude our formation of beliefs about our impressions, particularly about whether "they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses." The point is that we can only make judgments about sense impressions by using probable reasoning, that is, by judging from "the coherence of our perceptions." The impressions themselves are not then beliefs or judgments, but rather, through reflection, we form beliefs about their causes.

We've been discussing the epistemic status of impressions and beliefs without mentioning "Of Scepticism with regard to the senses," and it's time to remedy that. We noted at the start that one motivation for taking impressions to be beliefs is the foundationalist reading, where we have certainty only about our sense contents, and we make probable inferences from them. Some of the early paragraphs of 1.4.2 as well as the discussion of primary and secondary qualities in 14.3 suggest this reading. Yet it seems to me that Hume isn't emphasizing the certainty of our awareness of our present sense impressions, but rather their inability to tell us of anything beyond them. And when we consider how impoverished individual impressions, even complex ones are, we need something on the order of the account that Hume ultimately gives in 1.4.2 of the role of the imagination in enhancing our sensory contents to make up for their limitations. If present impressions so important in causal inference, then, are typically impressions enhanced by the mechanisms of the imagination described in 1.4.2, then causal inference turns out to be a much more complex affair than it initially appeared to be. And this suggest that we won't find pure impressions of sense and memory serving as beliefs.¹⁷

¹⁵ We can infer things about our past – cf. 1.4.6.20. But inferred beliefs about our past are different from memories!

¹⁶ Loeb emphasizes that belief gives us stability that we don't get from just our impressions.

¹⁷ See Kemp Smith, 1941, 124 ff.; Hendel, 1963, p. 152

In a long footnote in 1.37, Hume remarks on “a very considerable error” in other accounts of belief. Such accounts require the consideration of multiple objects for judgment. On that view, the belief that God exists must involve the idea of God and another idea. But there is no other idea. Hume can account for the belief in God quite simply as “a strong and steady conception ... such as approaches in some measure to an immediate impression.” (1.3.7.n20) But following this, in 1.3.7.7, formerly in the Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume expresses his inability to explain this manner of conception that differentiates beliefs from mere fictions of the imagination. Now it’s not clear what Hume’s problem is here. Isn’t he just talking about vivacity, and he hasn’t noted a problem in distinguishing impressions and from ideas, a distinction also founded on vivacity?

I think the way to make sense of Hume’s worry here is to recognize that the characterization of the manner of conception isn’t just a matter of vivacity. If it were, then Hume could point to impressions, and say: Beliefs are just like those. But they are not! First, they remain ideas, and they only approach “in some measure to an immediate impression.” The difficulty in characterizing the manner depends on Hume not equating beliefs with impressions. The problem really isn’t how to distinguish beliefs from mere fictions, but rather how to distinguish beliefs from impressions!

There isn’t space here to attempt a resolution of Hume’s puzzlement about belief. Some suggest that the resolution comes in the first *Enquiry*, and that Hume adopts the view that there is an impression of belief – a sentiment or feeling – that accompanies ideas.¹⁸ Hume does say that the term “belief” represents the sentiment. “*Belief* is the true and proper name of this feeling...” (*Enquiry*, 5.2.12) If this is right, it would be even easier to distinguish beliefs from impressions of sense. I don’t think it is right. The manner of conception in belief is the vivacity of the idea, not an additional impression. But it can’t be *just* the vivacity of the idea.¹⁹

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¹⁸ See Kamooneh, 2003, and Basson, 1958.

¹⁹ Cf. Loeb, 2002.

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