

Candidate 1 evidence

Hume Section II

18th Century philosopher David Hume aimed to prove where we gained our knowledge from via his book "*An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*". Hume is a rationalist, believing that all knowledge and memories we have must come from experience, and cannot be know *a priori*. In this essay, I will outline Hume's arguments in Section II, and discuss both the weaknesses and strengths that it brings to rationalism.

Hume described impressions as "more impressionable and livelier" than ideas. Ideas are less forcible and vivacious than impressions, due to the fact that we are merely remembering sensations, rather than the inescapable feeling of living through them. For example, remembering being in love is a lot different than being in love, due to the fact our body cannot mimic all the sensations and internal activity that goes on when we are experiencing an impression. Hume believes that all of our ideas come from impressions, and therefore if you do not have the corresponding impression, you will not be able to imagine the idea behind it either. For example, this could be illustrated by the fact a deaf person will never have the impression of sound and loud noises, so the concept of being scared by a loud noise is completely unimaginable to them. Hume goes on to tell us that anything we have not experienced but are still able to imagine comes from augmenting things (making them bigger), diminishing (making smaller), transposing (combining one thing's qualities with another) and translocation (putting an impression's quality elsewhere). For example, we are able to understand the concept of a unicorn by combining the idea of a horse with a narwhal's horn and glitter. We are able to translocate the wings of a bird to put on a horse to make Pegasi. Hume struggles to come up with any examples of knowledge we did not gain elsewhere. He defines ideas as being either simple (individual qualities, such as colour, emotion, that cannot be simplified further), or complex (a unicorn, a Golden Mountain, anything able to be broken down into further qualities).

Hume's theory is logically ambitious and central to his project, and definitely has many strengths. His arguments surrounding the fact that impressions and ideas are very different coincides well with what we know about memory and experience- especially when we consider past emotions and pains and how dull they feel now, even if they were a moment ago. Me crying this morning over my exam was a lot more vivid than me remembering it while sitting in the exam right now typing this, as our bodies do not recreate every sense while remembering, allowing the memory to fade and weaken over time of not experiencing that. His theory answers the argument of why, if Descartes has proved God exists, every culture and religion has a separate understanding of him- because this idea comes only through virtues and values they themselves have experienced, and how their way of life has shaped them to perceive things. It throws a wrench in Empiricism's approach, as this seems to be a more satisfying answer to this criticism than Descartes is able to provide.

One counterexample, however to Hume's idea is his own Missing Shade of Blue. Hume argues that a man who has seen every shade of blue apart from one would be able to imagine the Missing Shade of Blue. Although he claims this is the only counterexample of knowledge that we have not experienced, this could apply to things such as volume, or a musical scale, essentially telling us that we are able to imagine Simple Ideas, even though we are not able to break them down anymore. A rationalist arguing that you are transposing two nearby shades of blue would tell us that Simple Ideas, which include colour, are actually complex, thus undermining the entire structure of Simple and Complex ideas. For example, we could break the emotion of sadness down to the heaviness of your heart and melancholy and loss, and keep breaking these things further down, potentially never reaching something simple.

Another counterexample of Hume is the fact that the imagination can be more powerful than concurrent impressions. For example, while you are dreaming, your brain is focusing heavily on your imagination and does not let you experience the feel of you breathing, or the bed underneath you. Also, those with mental health conditions or taking recreational drugs may see and experience things again vividly, creating a new impression while reliving the impression it arises from. A Rationalist could reply by saying that PTSD and other hallucinations are not the same as merely remembering something, but this means that his theory does not cover every member of the population, suggesting there are serious flaws to it.

In conclusion, while Hume's arguments provide a solid structure for the basis of knowledge, there are gaps in his theory concerning simple and complex ideas, and the difference between ideas and impressions. He seems to underestimate the power and limits of human imagination and creativity, thus weakening his theory.