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HUME'S IMPRESSIONS AND IDEAS:  
THE REPRESENTATIVE ACCOUNT

by

CASEY R. FOWLER

Under the Direction of Dr. Eric Wilson

ABSTRACT

David Hume's project in *A Treatise of Human Nature* is founded upon his loosely-defined distinction between impressions and ideas. This distinction causes problems for his theory because it has difficulty accounting for the differences between species of perceptions. In this thesis, I try to solve some of these issues using a phenomenological account of the difference between impressions and ideas. My account supplements Stephen Everson's "functional" account to create a more robust system for differentiating Hume's perceptions.

INDEX WORDS: David Hume, phenomenology, categorical intuition, Stephen Everson, impressions, ideas

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THE REPRESENTATIVE ACCOUNT

BY

CASEY R. FOWLER

An Honors Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree of  
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Georgia State University  
2013

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Casey R. Fowler  
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THE REPRESENTATIVE ACCOUNT

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## DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Marshall, because I owe him at least this much.

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First, I would like to thank Dr. Eric Wilson for making Hume interesting, and for helping me become a better writer and thinker. Thank you Rebecca Harrison for always being willing to regard “thing” and “stuff” as highly technical terms. Many thanks to Alicia Higginbotham and Chris Bales for last minute copyediting. Last, I would like to thank/blame Sam Richards for opening the intentionality can of worms to begin with.

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## 1. Introduction

David Hume begins *A Treatise of Human Nature* by dividing perceptions of the mind into impressions and ideas and builds the rest of his project in *A Treatise* on this distinction. The distinction is vague: he explains that the difference between impressions and ideas “consists in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind and make their way into our thought or consciousness” (T 1.1.1.1).<sup>1</sup> Essentially, the difference between impressions and ideas consists in the “force” and “vivacity” with which they appear to the mind: impressions strike the consciousness with more force or vivacity than ideas do. Hume does not refine this distinction further, and equates it with the difference between thinking and feeling (T 1.1.1.1).

As it stands, Hume’s distinction causes problems for his theory because it does not provide a way to distinguish between species of impressions—weak impressions tend to resemble ideas, and strong ideas tend to resemble impressions. Since Hume asserts that the distinction amounts to differing degrees of force and vivacity, it can be difficult to distinguish species of perception from one another. For example: a strong idea may possess the same amount of force and vivacity as an impression, and if the only difference between impressions and ideas is force, then it seems that there *is* no way to tell the strong idea from the impression. This puts the soundness of Hume’s entire project at risk.

Due to the loose manner in which it is defined, Hume’s distinction between impressions and ideas can be interpreted in multiple ways. The traditional, or standard, interpretation charges that the “force and vivacity” formulation of the distinction is either “not very plausible” or “simple to the point of idiocy” (Everson, 402). The traditional interpretation takes issue with the

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<sup>1</sup> References to “T” are of (Hume 2000) with the book, part, section, and paragraph numbers.

lack of a defined distinction between impressions and ideas, and charges that Hume provides no reliable way to distinguish the two.

As an alternative to the standard account, Stephen Everson formulates the functional account, which interprets force and vivacity as causal notions and defines the force and vivacity of perceptions as their ability to affect the mind. Everson states that interpreting impressions and ideas causally gives a more satisfying account than the traditional reading can; however, this functional account still lacks the something that clearly *defines* the difference between impressions and ideas. Everson calls for some quality, inherent in the perception, that is “over and above” force and vivacity (408).

The issue with the distinction between impressions and ideas resolves into the fact that there must be some property other than force and vivacity that allows us to differentiate perceptions. Hume’s vague distinction causes two main problems for his theory: (1) It does not have provisions for differentiation in cases such as weak impressions and strong ideas; (2) it cannot fully explicate beliefs—lively ideas related to present impressions. There must be something that allows us to distinguish one type of impression from another type of impression, and impressions from beliefs. Hume’s loosely-defined distinction does not provide clarity between types of impressions and is not rigorous enough to support his theory effectively.

To explicate the distinction between impressions and ideas, I will supplement Everson’s functional account with the property that makes perceptions differentiable. I will argue that this property is representative ability, and that the substantive difference between impressions and ideas is the capability to represent something. Impressions are incapable of having representative or intentional content; however, ideas inherently possess intentional content and have the ability

to represent by virtue of how they are formed. Explicating this representative distinction will provide clear guidelines for distinguishing impressions from ideas and will place the burden of distinction on properties that inhere in the perception, rather than on force and vivacity. I will also use the representative distinction to address the problems with Hume's notion of belief.

## 2. Hume's Impressions and Ideas, and the Standard Reading

### 2.1 Hume's Theory of Ideas

In this section I will give a brief introduction to Hume's theory of ideas, and explain how it relates to the phenomenological concepts I will introduce later. Hume declares that "all the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds," which he labels *impressions* and *ideas* (T 1.1.1.1). Impressions are "all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul," and ideas are the "faint images" of impressions present in thinking and reasoning (T 1.1.1.1). He repeatedly asserts that impressions are always antecedent to ideas, that ideas are copies of impressions, and that these ideas represent the impressions from which they are derived (T 1.1.1.12). Furthermore, Hume claims that the difference between impressions and ideas lies in the "degrees of force and liveliness" with which they appear to the mind (T 1.1.1.1). This particular point makes up Hume's distinction, and is the basis of the complaints about his theory. I will discuss this further in the next section.

Hume posits that impressions and ideas can either be simple or complex. Simple perceptions are those that "admit of no distinction or separation," and complex perceptions can be broken down into parts (T 1.1.1.2). Hume further divides impressions into original and secondary, also known as impressions of sensation and reflection, respectively.<sup>2</sup> He does not give a detailed account of impressions of sensation, as he asserts that "the examination of our sensations belongs more to anatomists" (T 1.1.2.1). He instead gives a thorough account of secondary impressions.

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<sup>2</sup> Hume initially distinguishes impressions into impressions of sensation and reflection in 1.1.2, but later in 2.1.1 he resolves this distinction into original and secondary.

Hume defines original and secondary impressions in the following passage.

Original impressions or impressions of sensation are such as without any antecedent perception arise in the soul, from the constitution of the body, from the animal spirits, or from the application of objects to the external organs. Secondary, or reflective impressions are such as proceed from some of these original ones, either immediately or by the interposition of its idea. Of the first kind are all the impressions of the senses, and all bodily pains and pleasures: Of the second are the passions, and other emotions resembling them (T 2.1.1.1).

What Hume means here is that original impressions are not reliant upon preceding impressions or ideas; they are foundational in this sense. Secondary impressions, by contrast, arise from ideas or other impressions, and are dependent upon them. It seems appropriate for Hume to refer to some secondary impressions as “reflective” because there is always some *post*-reflective or *extra*-experiential component involved in their creation. Original impressions are pre-reflective and experientially radical.

Hume begins his treatment of the passions by dividing them into *direct* and *indirect*. He defines the direct passions as those arising “immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure.” Hume asserts that the indirect passions derive from the same principles as the direct, but with “the conjunction of other qualities” (T 2.1.2.4). He gives a thorough account of the indirect passions, but is very brief with the direct passions, citing that “none of the direct affections seem to merit our particular attention, except hope and fear” (T 2.3.9.9).

Hume considers desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security to be direct passions. The indirect passions include pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, and generosity. Note that Hume explicitly states that the passions do not represent; he asserts that “a passion is an original existence...and contains not any representative quality” (T 2.3.3.5). Here I will focus on the more thorough account of the indirect passions to prepare for later exposition of how they acquire intentional content.

Hume explains his account of the indirect passions by using the familiar notions of pride and humility. He asserts that pride and humility have the same object: the self. He explains that the passions must have both an object and a cause, but he stresses that the object and the cause of these passions cannot be the same. He states that one idea will produce a passion, and that the passion “turns our view to another idea” (T 2.1.2.4). The first idea is the cause of the passion, and the second is the object of the passion. Regarding the cause of a passion, Hume makes a distinction between the quality, which stimulates the passion, and the subject in which the quality occurs. Furthermore, he posits that the subject must be in some sort of relation to us, otherwise the quality would not stimulate the passion.

To illustrate this in the case of pride, Hume gives us an example of a beautiful house. If I am proud of my beautiful house, the cause of my pride is the beautiful house. The quality of the cause in this case is beauty, and the subject is my house—a house that is related to me via possession. I am the object in this example. There is nothing in the passion itself that represents. The idea of “my beautiful house” may cause the passion of pride, but the intentional content belongs to the idea itself. My pride is directed at me, making it an intentional state, but the pride itself does not possess intentional content. The pride does not represent the beauty, the house, or any combination of the two. The passions require relations of ideas, and it seems that this is how they acquire intentional content.

## 2.2 The Standard Reading

In “The Difference between Thinking and Feeling,” Stephen Everson admits that Hume’s notion of the difference between impressions and ideas is perplexing. Everson suggests that, because of the way Hume conceives of perceptions, it is odd that he is inclined to explain the distinction in terms of force and vivacity instead of causally (401). Hume does not commit to an explanation of how impressions arise, and Everson notes that this refusal to “look outside of the mind when defining impressions” is purposeful (401). Everson suggests that Hume’s skepticism regarding the external world places this constraint upon impressions and ideas. Everson posits that it would be ridiculous to appeal to external objects in order to make distinctions between impressions and ideas, because we do not have a solid reason to believe that they exist. This is why “the distinction between ideas and impressions is drawn in terms of their force and liveliness or vivacity, since these properties of ‘perceptions’ are available to introspection” (402).

Everson is worried that, even though we can explain the reason for the style of Hume’s distinction, we have a more difficult time explaining the distinction itself. He states that this account does not give us any idea of what force and vivacity actually are as properties of perceptions. He posits that commentators either avoid the question of what Hume actually means by force and vivacity, or they brand his theory as “not very plausible” or “simple to the point of idiocy” (403). Everson states that Jonathan Bennett takes “force and liveliness to be equivalent to intensity and violence” and declares that this explanation is overly simple (402). Everson defines this as the standard reading of Hume’s distinction. Furthermore, Everson explains that Barry Stroud seems to take Hume’s distinction almost literally, and in doing so, also suggests that force and liveliness are to be understood in terms of intensity and violence, and this further obscures the difference between weak impressions and strong ideas (403).

Everson posits that both of these interpretations of Hume's distinction are the traditional understanding, and this is what he wants to challenge. He sums up the use of force and vivacity in the traditional interpretation as such: force and vivacity "refer to intrinsic properties of images, and are non-relational" (404). What this means is that, in the traditional interpretation, force and vivacity are considered intrinsic properties of perceptions. They are considered non-relational because whatever force or vivacity a perception possesses can be ascertained by surveying the perception itself. However, Everson warns that the term 'image' simply means 'copy,' and we should take care to not attribute a strictly imagistic interpretation to Hume's theory (405). In the following sections, I will explicate both Bennett's and Stroud's account of Hume's distinction.

#### *Bennett's Account*

In *Locke, Berkeley, and Hume: Central Themes*, Jonathan Bennett suggests that Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas is overly simple, and bases this conclusion on Hume allegedly equating impressions to "intense or violent sensory states" (Bennett, 225). Bennett begins his argument by asserting that Hume's account suggests that impressions are nothing more than forceful perceptions and that they occur *only* "in experience of the objective realm" (224). Bennett asserts that Hume's "official position is that (a) the impression/idea line is just the lively/faint line within perceptions... (b) impressions occur only in experience of the objective realm, and that (c) ideas occur only in thinking and reasoning" (224). While Bennett does not give a definition for his use of the term "objective realm," he seems to imply that he means some physically-observable world. He defines Hume's impressions as "the sense-data of normal perceptions" (222).



Bennett takes issue with Hume's initial characterization of the difference between impressions and ideas as put forth in the opening paragraph of *A Treatise*. A large amount of Bennett's argument is supported by his interpretation of this passage:

Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking. The common degrees of these are easily distinguish'd; tho' it is not impossible but in particular instances they may very nearly approach to each other. Thus in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may approach to our impressions (T 1.1.1.1).

Bennett asserts that, even if this passage is misinterpreted, it is clear that Hume is equating impressions with "perceptions of the objective realm" (225). Furthermore, Bennett claims that when this is combined with Hume's account of the distinction between impressions and ideas, then Hume is equating "'experience of the objective realm' with 'intense or violent sensory states'" and that this, taken as an explanation of what it is to have perceptions of the objective realm "would be simple to the point of idiocy" (225).<sup>3</sup>

### *Stroud's Account*

Stroud raises a similar objection. He argues that Hume does not make the difference between impressions and ideas very clear and does not attempt to explicate his point further. Stroud asserts that Hume is making a claim about what the difference between impressions and ideas is, and that this claim needs to be defended and explained. According to Stroud the obvious

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<sup>3</sup> It is not clear whether Bennett took into account the remainder of this passage from *A Treatise*:

As on the other hand it sometimes happens, that our impressions are so faint and low, that we cannot distinguish them from our ideas. But notwithstanding this near resemblance in a few instances, they are in general so very different, that no one can make a scruple to rank them under distinct heads (T 1.1.1.1).

It seems that, if Bennett were to take into account the remainder of this passage, then his suggestion that Hume is equating impressions with 'violent sensory states' may encounter some problems. For the purposes of this paper, I will not attempt to defend Hume from Bennett's claims—I am providing Bennett's account as an example of the traditional reading of the distinction between impressions and ideas.

difference between thinking and feeling does not inform the difference between impressions and ideas. He asserts that simply claiming that the distinction is the difference between thinking and feeling does not amount to a coherent account. He concludes that:

Certainly everyone will acknowledge that there is a difference between feeling or perceiving something and merely thinking about it in its absence, and not many words are needed to convince people of that distinction. But Hume is putting forward a view about what that difference is. He says it is merely a difference in the degree of 'force and liveliness' with which certain perceptions strike upon the mind. And that does need explanation and defence. The obviousness of the fact that there is a distinction between perceiving and thinking does not make Hume's account of that difference obvious. In fact, it is not even clear what his account comes to (Stroud, 28).

In *Hume*, Stroud illustrates his objection with the example of a detective. A detective may survey the scene of a murder and make mental note of the various features of it; later on the detective may recall with accuracy what he had seen at the scene of the murder. Stroud states that, according to Hume, the detective would have an idea that exactly resembles his impressions of the room (29). While recalling the scene the detective remembers that the victim is right-handed, and in his recollection, notices that a fire poker is leaning on the left-hand side of the fireplace. Stroud claims that this sudden insight is a perception that is more vivid than the initial impression the detective had at the scene of the crime. Stroud explains:

That part of his present idea that includes the fireplace and the poker now strikes upon his mind or consciousness with much greater force and liveliness than the corresponding part of the exactly similar scene had done earlier. Given the theory of ideas, it would seem that the detective had a perception before the mind when he was just thinking about the fireplace and the poker in their absence that strike his mind or consciousness with a greater degree of force and liveliness than did the perception he had before the mind when he originally perceived them. And such things seem to happen often (29).

Stroud uses this example to argue that, if the only difference between impressions and ideas is force or vivacity, then the detective was having an impression when he was simply thinking about the room, and an idea when he was originally perceiving it (29). According to Stroud, this

situation creates problems for Hume's theory—it indicates that an idea may have come before its corresponding impression. If Stroud's assertion is correct, then this is damning for Hume's theory of ideas.

Stroud concludes that Hume either needs to further define force and liveliness of perceptions, or he must find some other way to differentiate ideas from impressions. Stroud suggests that one less problematic way to make the distinction would be to say that “impressions are those perceptions that are before the mind when and only when we are actually perceiving or being stimulated by some external physical object” (29).

### **3. Everson's Reply to the 'Traditional Interpretation'**

#### **3.1 The Functional Account**

Everson argues that any account of Hume's theory of ideas must conform to two restrictions. First, Hume does not set up force and vivacity as technical terms, so they must be understood as literally as possible. Second, the account needs to recognize Hume's "solipsistic account of the mind" and make a perception's force and vivacity available to introspection (403). Everson states that he considers the traditional interpretation of Hume's terms force and vivacity as referring to "intrinsic properties of images" and posits that they are non-relational. What he means here is that force and vivacity inhere in the perception, and that the degree of force and vivacity can be discerned by surveying the perception itself (404). He explains that the nature of force and vivacity in this conception make giving an exact analysis of the terms very difficult for Hume.

To explain the traditional interpretation, Everson gives an analogy between perceptions and a slide projection: when the perception is an impression, then the projector has a bright bulb and clear lens; when the perception is an idea, the bulb is dimmer and the lens is less clear. Everson admits that the analogy does not work if we appeal to a causal explanation of how the projected images differ; but an observer who is completely ignorant of image projection technology would distinguish between the two with the "intrinsic properties" of the projections (404). Everson posits that this theory conforms to the second restriction—respecting Hume's solipsistic account of the mind—but if we are going to consider force and vivacity as 'intrinsic properties' then we will need to understand Hume's entire theory in terms of images.

Everson argues that if we look harder at the traditional model for the distinction, we can raise serious concerns caused by the restrictions placed upon it. The first problem with the traditional model is that force and vivacity, understood fairly literally per the first restriction, are *causal* notions; Everson cites that Hume uses *power* and *force* interchangeably throughout his account of causation. Furthermore, he argues that Hume uses *force*, *vivacity* and *liveliness* to refer to the same properties (406).

Everson asserts that Hume is treating force and vivacity causally; he paraphrases Hume as stating that “one ‘perception’ has greater force or vivacity than another if it is such as to produce a stronger effect on the mind” (406). He demonstrates that a benefit of reading force and vivacity as causal concepts is that Hume’s distinction between the ideas of the memory and imagination becomes clearer. He cites Hume’s notion of a ‘perfect idea’ as an idea that has lost all vivacity: according to the traditional interpretation of the distinction, the ‘perfect idea’ would not make any sense, as force and vivacity are considered intrinsic properties of perceptions (407). Everson points out that, if we understand force and vivacity causally, then the notion of ‘perfect idea’ is unproblematic—force is “no longer an intrinsic or an essential property of an idea;” therefore, an idea without force will simply fail to affect the mind in a particular manner (407).

Additionally, Everson suggests that Hume is not trying to define the difference between thinking and feeling as the difference between impressions and ideas. It is instead the other way around: Hume uses the difference between thinking and feeling to describe the difference between impressions and ideas. Everson asserts that Hume does not explicate the difference between thinking and feeling further because “it does not stand in need of explanation,” as

everyone can easily perceive the difference (407). Everson suggests that the difference between thinking and feeling lies in being actuated differently. For example, a man who is feeling angry will be caused to behave differently than a man who is simply *thinking* about being angry (408). Everson posits that “given a suitable set of beliefs and desires, one’s feelings will motivate one to action whereas one’s mere thoughts will not” (408).

### **3.2 Where the Functional Account Leaves Off**

The functional account does not cover it all though; it does not account for very weak impressions and very strong ideas. Since force and vivacity cannot be inherent qualities in perceptions, we still need to provide qualities or features inherent in the perceptions themselves that allow them to be differentiable. Everson correctly points out that Hume’s account does not have a provision for how to differentiate species of impressions and species of ideas from other impressions and ideas. He seems particularly concerned about Hume’s notion of belief, as it is a particularly strong species of idea that resembles an impression with no protocol for differentiation.

Everson explains that the functional account still does not clearly distinguish between types of impressions and ideas. Indeed, since beliefs are ideas and they are clearly motivating, the actual distinction between impressions and ideas cannot rest on the causal explanation offered by the functional account. He urges that this difference relies either on “some distinguishing feature over and above their simple possession of force and vivacity” or on a more detailed account of how each perception affects the mind (408).

Everson raises another issue with the causal interpretation and Hume’s account of belief, suggesting that it does not leave room for perceptual beliefs. This could render Hume’s claims

about belief incoherent. Everson describes a continuing impression of a piece of paper—as he stares at the paper and has a continuing impression of it, he is unable to form an idea of it, and is therefore unable to have a belief about it. He states that, if only force and vivacity are used to differentiate impressions and ideas, then an impression and its corresponding idea cannot coexist—the impression must lapse to allow room for its idea to emerge (409). Everson suggests that this sort of explanation would make perceptual beliefs impossible.

Everson proposes that this explanation might not be problematic for Hume because his account of belief “derives its explanatory force” from his “obviously functional account” of impressions (409). Furthermore, Everson points out that Hume’s characterization of beliefs makes them almost analogous with impressions; Hume intends to explicate the difference between beliefs and other ideas with the same terms that he uses to differentiate impressions and ideas. Everson claims that the problem with this kind of distinction is that, by characterizing beliefs and impressions in the way that he does, Hume makes it nearly impossible to differentiate between the two. Everson asserts that, even though Hume does not give an official answer regarding “distinguishing impressions from forceful ideas,” he leaves enough room to argue that there might be a way to distinguish between them. In the next section, I will attempt to define the basic distinction between impressions and ideas.

## 4. Phenomenology and the Representative Distinction

I will now present my argument for the substantive difference between impressions and ideas. I submit that the difference between impressions and ideas is the ability to represent, recognized through categorial intuition. First, I will provide a brief introduction to the phenomenological concepts I will employ in my argument. Second, I will explain how an idea comes to represent. Third, I will supplement Everson's functional account with what I call the representative distinction. Finally, I will address Stroud's detective and the problem with beliefs.

### 4.1 Phenomenological Concepts

The first phenomenological concept is the foundational concept—intentionality and intending.<sup>4</sup> Intentionality is the notion that “every act of consciousness is directed towards an object of some kind” (9). When we have an idea, it is an idea *about* or *of* something. The idea has intentional content; intentional content represents something. When we intend, we have a conscious relationship with an object (8). In the context of phenomenology, *intention* means mental or cognitive, *not* practical intentions, such as “I intend to go to the store later today.”

Intentions can be either empty or filled. An empty intention is an intending that takes something that is not present to the intender as its object. A filled intention takes something that is present to the intender as its object. We often have empty intentions about something that gradually become filled intentions; when the empty intentions become filled intentions, we have *intuition* of the intended object. Take a play, for example: I see an advertisement for a play, and decide to purchase tickets. I think about the play in the weeks leading up to the performance, and I talk about it with my friends. These are empty intentions, because the object of my intention is

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<sup>4</sup> These concepts are as Robert Sokolowski explains in his book, *Introduction to Phenomenology*.



not present to me. When I watch the play my intentions become filled intentions. The play is present to me; while I watch it, I have *intuition* of the play. Robert Sokolowski explains that intuition is “simply having the object actually present to us, in contrast with having it intended in its absence” (35).

The second phenomenological concept is that of *categorial intuition*. According to Sokolowski, the word *categorial* “refers to the kind of intending that articulates an object, the kind that introduces syntax into what we experience” (88). A categorial object<sup>5</sup> is an object in a certain sort of context—‘a chair’ is a *simple* object, but ‘my blue chair’ is a *categorial* object. In order for a simple object to become a categorial object, we go through three phases. The first phase is the initial perception of the object. There is no particular thought process associated with impressions of the object at this point. In the second phase a feature of the object comes to our attention. The feature is “highlighted” and we take notice of it. In the third phase the object becomes recognized as a whole, and the highlighted portion is recognized as a part of the whole. The whole stands apart from the background, and the part stands out from the whole.

In order for the perceived object to become a categorial object, “a relation between whole and part” must be “articulated and registered;” the whole and the part must be recognized as being distinct and a relation between the two must be disclosed (90). Sokolowski explains that this articulation is *categorial intuition*—the moment at which the categorial object becomes present to us.

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<sup>5</sup> The word *object* here is not intended to be limited to physical objects. It can refer to anything we can have an impression of.

Here is an example of categorial intuition: I see an oak tree. I perceive the tree's textures, colors, and extension. As I am looking at the tree, I notice a hollow in its trunk; the hollow becomes a highlighted feature. I recognize the tree as a whole, and recognize that the hollow is a distinct *part* of the tree. I understand that this oak tree has a hollow in it—this is categorial intuition, and at the same moment, the tree has become present to me as a categorial object. I can now declare that “this oak tree has a hollow in it.” The oak tree has emerged from the background of unarticulated perceptions, and the hollow stands out from the whole of the oak tree.

Categorial intuition disrupts the flow of impressions and affords us a packaged state of affairs that can be “detached from the immediacy of perception,” communicated, and related to other states of affairs (92). Sokolowski explains that once we have achieved categorial intuition, “we have moved from sensibility to intellection, from mere experiencing to an initial understanding” (90).

#### **4.2 Impressions, Ideas, Intention and Representation**

I submit that categorial intuition of an object is necessary in order for it to represent anything, because it needs to be differentiable from all other objects. We must move from impressions to ideas and reflect in order for something to be represented—this is the difference between impressions and ideas. Impressions cannot represent for us, because they do not directly involve thought, nor can they be reflected upon. If someone is reflecting on something, they are reflecting on an idea, because it is not possible to reflect on impressions themselves. I submit that the substantive difference between impressions and ideas is representational ability. Ideas have

the ability to represent, and impressions do not. In this section, I will explain why impressions do not have representative ability.

In order for something to be represented, a relation is required—a representation is a representation *of* something; this indicates a relation between the two. The representation needs to resemble or otherwise be connected to the thing being represented. The represented object must also be distinguished from the background of other objects. Here I will argue that some process of thought or consideration is requisite for a “relation.” Hume explains relations as such, with the former relation being natural, and the latter being philosophical:

The word *relation* is commonly us'd in two senses considerably different from each other. Either for that quality, by which two ideas are connected together in the imagination, and the one naturally introduces the other... or for that particular circumstance, in which, even upon the arbitrary union of two ideas in the fancy, we may think proper to compare them (T 1.1.5.1).

From the language Hume uses here, it is evident that there is some sort of thinking going on in relating one idea to another. With natural relations, it is something that the imagination does automatically; with the philosophical relations, it is something that the mind can willingly do. This characterization of philosophical relations indicates a process of thinking or consideration; in order for me to compare one thing to another, I must consider things about them.

The role of consideration in the natural relations is less obvious, because one idea “involuntarily” introduces another (Owen, 80). It seems as if the involuntary nature of the transition between ideas would preclude consideration or thinking. In fact, Hume uses the term imagination in a somewhat inexact manner throughout the *Treatise*, but it seems as if he intends it to be considered as some sort of thinking. He states that “the imagination has the command over all its ideas, and can, join, and mix, and vary them in all the ways possible” (T 1.3.7.7). The

imagination deals with ideas, recall that ideas are “the faint images of [impressions] in thinking and reasoning” (T 1.1.1.1). It seems as if consideration or thought is necessary when dealing with relations. In order for one thing to represent another, these things must stand in a relation with one another, and recognizing this relation requires some form of consideration or intellection whether implicit or explicit.

Recall that impressions resolve into original and secondary. Original impressions are pre-reflective and experientially radical; secondary impressions are post-reflective and arise from other impressions or ideas. It follows from all this, that if original impressions are experientially radical and pre-reflective, then they cannot be put into a relation with something they are purported to represent. Since secondary impressions necessarily rely on preceding perceptions (whether through an idea or another impression) it is clear that the impressions cannot represent on their own. Ideas and secondary impressions are dependent upon pre-reflective experience. Pre-reflective experience cannot have representative content, because this would require some kind of consideration of the content. The representing comes into play through relations, and this occurs after reflection and categorial intuition.

I am not suggesting that impressions do not have content, they must have experiential content, but the point is that the content of an impression cannot represent.<sup>6</sup> The experiential content is represented by an idea *related* to the impression. So all impressions, including passions, only acquire representative content by having an idea associated with them. I submit that recognizing a representation requires categorial intuition. Recall that categorial intuition

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<sup>6</sup> This is especially true when we consider the restrictions of Hume’s solipsistic account of mind. If impressions are purely mental or internal phenomena, then they certainly cannot represent anything—they are simply too primary to be a representation of something. Take a painting, for example: a reproduction of a painting is a representation, but the painting itself is a sort of primary existence—it simply *is* itself, not a representation of itself.

facilitates differentiating the parts from the whole and the whole from the background; furthermore, it allows us to put our perceptions into a context in which we can understand that the part is of the whole but separate. You cannot have an idea of *red chair* without having categorial intuition of the chair to begin with.

To illustrate my argument, consider the following example. While walking down the street, I am struck and injured by a red car. I have original impressions of the pain, of the red, of the extension and body of the car, and the sounds that are made during the event. These are simple impressions that are copied as simple ideas. According to Hume's theory, these simple ideas get joined together and become complex ideas. The ideas *represent* the impressions they are derived from. So my idea of *red car* is a complex idea that links and represents my impressions of the *red* and the *car*. At some point, I have categorial intuition and can recognize the car as a *red car* or *the red car that struck me*. I can tell the police officers that "the car that struck me was red." I move from experiencing the red car as a series or group of impressions to having an articulated idea of a red car that stands out from the background of unarticulated perceptions.

After I heal from my injuries, I am walking down a street and I perceive a red car. Again, I have impressions of *red* and *car*, these are again original impressions.<sup>7</sup> These impressions become the complex idea of *red car*, and I have an idea of pain associated with the idea of *red car*. Recall that direct passions are considered secondary impressions and cannot arise without the assistance of original impressions or ideas associated with them. My idea of *red car* is

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<sup>7</sup> I would not have an impression of *car*, as such. I would have various impressions of the shape, the color, and the motion of the car. I have consolidated these impressions for the purposes of brevity.

associated with the idea of my impression of the pain I experienced when struck by a red car, and I therefore experience fear. In this example, my impression of *red* and *car* do not represent anything, the simple ideas of *red* and *car* represent the concept of ‘something that has the quality of the color red’ and ‘something that is a car.’ These ideas are linked by the one or more principles of association and become the idea of *red car*.

My experience of fear does not represent anything, but the passion has the complex idea that represents “that time I was struck and injured by a red car” annexed to it. This is how this instance of my fear acquires intentional content. My fear is directed at or about the red car. The fear itself does not represent the red car, or the time I was struck by a red car—it is only associated with the ideas of these things.

Furthermore, I experienced categorial intuition of *red car* in this instance as well. If the idea of *red car* had not emerged from the background, I would not have recognized it as such—I might have only seen a car, or I might not have noticed it at all. In that case, my impressions of *red* and *car* would not have become connected to “that time I was struck and injured by a red car.” I would not have recognized the car as *red car*, and I would not have experienced fear.

It may be helpful here to recall the earlier example of my beautiful house. If I am proud of my beautiful house, my pride is caused by the beautiful house. The quality that inspires the cause is beauty, the subject is my house. There is nothing in the passion itself that represents—the intentional content is in the idea itself. My pride is directed at something (myself, as the object of the pride), which makes it an intentional state, but the pride itself does not possess any intentional content. The pride does not represent the beauty or the house.

These examples illustrate how impressions lack their own representative content, and only become joined to content by being attached to an associated idea. They also illustrate how representation hinges upon categorial intuition. The onus of representation belongs to ideas, not to impressions. In order for something to represent, it has to stand out from the things it does not represent. A red chair cannot represent a red chair unless it has been distinguished from other kinds of chairs *and* the general background of unarticulated objects. In order for this to happen we have to achieve categorial intuition, which brings the object into the foreground and differentiates it from the unarticulated background. Categorial intuition relies upon relating parts and wholes and involves reflection.

Impressions cannot be reflected upon, and can only be distinguished after the fact—they are only reflected upon as ideas. Even if impressions could possess representative content, there would be no way for us to comprehend it—any sort of differentiation that occurs in categorial intuition requires the work of the intellect. I submit that the intentionality and representative ability of ideas provides the “over and above” that Everson deems necessary for a clear distinction between impressions and ideas.

### **4.3 Supplementing Everson’s Functional Account**

Now I will address how my account of the representative distinction supplements Everson’s functional account. Recall that Everson highlighted two restrictions on any account of the distinction between impressions and ideas. First, force and vivacity are not defined as technical terms, and must therefore be understood as literally as possible; second, the account must conform to Hume’s solipsistic account of the mind. The representative distinction conforms to these two restrictions.

First, the representative distinction takes force and vivacity literally. Since the representative distinction clearly informs the difference between impressions and ideas, force and vivacity are freed to be purely causal terms as in Everson's functional account. Furthermore, the distinction is not founded on force and vivacity, so they therefore become additive properties to perceptions. The representative distinction allows both impressions and ideas to take on varying degrees of force and vivacity without confounding species of impressions. Take a strong idea for an example: if the only difference between impressions and ideas is force and vivacity, then a strong idea may resemble an impression, with no way to tell the two apart. If we apply the representative distinction in this case, the strong idea is clearly an idea because it has representative content—it is an idea *about* something. The idea happens to strike the mind with much force and vivacity, and may *feel* similar to an impression, but now the idea is defined independently of force and vivacity. Force and vivacity become additive qualities that seem to inhere in the “delivery” of the perception to the mind—they simply affect how a perception strikes the mind.

Second, the representative distinction conforms to Hume's solipsistic account of the mind. Since impressions are not representative, it is unnecessary to appeal to causes outside of the mind to explain whether impressions represent what caused them. The representative distinction is not affected whether impressions are caused by objects in the external world, or are completely mental phenomena. Since the distinction between impressions and ideas is representative ability, and ideas are copies of impressions, it makes no difference *what* caused an impression—the idea will still represent the impression by virtue of being a copy of it.



#### 4.4 Answering Stroud's Detective

The problems for Hume's theory that are emphasized by Stroud's detective example can be addressed by the concepts I have introduced in this paper: first, using categorial intuition along with Hume's notion of the ideas of memory; second, with the representative distinction coupled with force and vivacity.

First, when the detective recalls his idea of the scene of the crime, he has an idea of the memory present. Hume posits that the ideas of the memory tend to retain some of the force and vivacity provided by the impressions from which they were derived (T 1.1.3.1). While the detective has the idea of the room present in his mind, he is struck by the position of the poker, along with the idea that the victim was right-handed.

I submit that when the detective realized that the poker was on the wrong side of the fireplace, he had *categorial intuition*. He recognized the scene as a whole, but then the poker became highlighted. Once the poker was highlighted, he recognized it as a separate part of the whole. The poker was placed into the scene's context—it came into the foreground of the detective's idea of the scene; the detective could declare that the poker's position was something remarkable. This intuition spurred a secondary impression, something like an 'aha!' moment, which provided force to his idea.

One possible problem with this position is that categorial intuition supposedly occurs when moving from sensing to intellection. If the detective was thinking about the room, then he must have already moved into intellection, so categorial intuition would have already occurred. This problem can be answered by the fact that an idea, while being thought upon, is currently present to the mind. It is a *perception* in the mind, and is therefore part of the detective's

immediate perceptual environment. If he recalled the room accurately, as Stroud asserts, then there is no reason to suggest that he could not achieve categorial intuition within his idea of the room. The idea of the room is a complex idea, and it is plausible that certain details might not have been highlighted when he initially perceived the room.

Second, since we can distinguish between impressions and ideas based on representative ability, we can suggest that the detective's idea of the poker was just a remarkably strong idea. It is uncontroversial to claim that he had an idea that represented the poker's position in the room. The representative distinction leaves plenty of room for us to claim that the strong idea of the poker represents the poker and possessed a large degree of force and vivacity when it struck the detective's mind. Were the poker simply an impression, the detective would not have even realized that it was on the left side of the fireplace—this would have required relating ideas, which is impossible with mere impressions. The detective would have to relate the idea that the victim was right-handed to the idea of the poker being on the left-hand side of the fireplace, and this simply could not have occurred if the poker's position were an impression as Stroud suggests.

#### 4.5 The Problem with Beliefs

Hume asserts that belief alters the way we conceive of ideas and affords them more force and vivacity, leading them to resemble impressions more closely than ideas; thus, he tends to explain belief in terms of motivating force. Everson points out that Hume's characterization of beliefs is plagued by the issues that the force and vivacity distinction causes. Hume defines belief as "a lively idea related to or associated with a present impression," and states that "the idea of an object is an essential part of the belief of it, but not the whole" (T 1.3.7.1-5). Beliefs come to have motivating force similar to impressions by becoming strongly associated with impressions. Hume insists that "when any impression becomes present to us, it not only transports the mind to such ideas as are related to it, but likewise communicates to them a share of its force and vivacity" (T 1.3.8.2). Belief is still an *idea*—it is an idea *of* or *about* something that becomes strongly associated with an impression.

Categorial intuition addresses Everson's initial concerns about belief. Recall Everson's example of the continuous perceptions of the paper: he suggests that the unbroken impression would not leave room for its corresponding idea to coexist, and he would not be able to form a belief about the paper. Recall that categorial intuition disrupts continuous perception and affords us categorial objects—packaged states of affairs—which we can differentiate from other unarticulated objects, and relate to other categorial objects. Furthermore, ideas come to be recognized as representative through categorial intuition—this process also applies to beliefs, whether perceptual or otherwise. I would not avoid a pothole while driving my car unless I believed it to be there, assenting to the idea of the pothole first requires a categorial intuition of the pothole.

Finally, if we accept that the difference between impressions and ideas is representative ability, then beliefs are easily explained as strong perceptions that represent something and motivate, and impressions are strong perceptions that do not represent something. Recall that the representative distinction allows force and vivacity to become additive properties of perceptions, and according to Everson's functional account, greater degrees of force and vivacity tend to motivate. It seems as if the representative distinction clearly defines beliefs as ideas and allows us to assert that certain ideas can carry motivating force and vivacity—while remaining identifiable as an idea.

## 5. Final Thoughts

The representative distinction can resolve most of the problems with Hume's theory of ideas; it clearly defines the difference between impressions and ideas, allows that some perceptions will possess more force and vivacity than others, and conforms to the two restrictions Everson set forth. Despite its strengths, the representative distinction may fall short of fully explicating the notion of belief. Hume asserts that the belief is "something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgment from the fictions of the imagination" (T 1.3.7.7). While the representative distinction can help to explain why a belief *feels* different than a mere idea—the belief possesses a greater degree of force and vivacity—it cannot explain how assenting to an idea works, or how it makes it a belief.

The representative distinction is based partly on the notion that ideas come to represent through categorial intuition, and this process involves some act of the intellect whether implicit or explicit. Since beliefs are ideas, they would also require some act of the intellect in order to be

created. The way that Hume characterizes belief seems to complicate this matter for the representative distinction. Hume states that:

I conclude, that the belief, which attends the present impression, and is produc'd by a number of past impressions and conjunctions; that this belief, I say, arises immediately, without any new operation of the reason or imagination. Of this I can be certain, because I never am conscious of any such operation, and find nothing in the subject, on which it can be founded (T 1.3.8.10).

If belief can arise “without any new operation of the reason or imagination,” then it seems as if the representative distinction has a much harder time accounting for the formation of beliefs. The claim that beliefs are simply strong motivating perceptions that represent becomes less sound if we consider that representation requires an act of the intellect, which Hume seems to discount here.

Perhaps we can mitigate this problem by taking Hume’s discussion regarding the “vulgar division of the acts of the understanding” into account (T 1.3.7). He complains that acts of the understanding are improperly divided into *conception*, *judgment*, and *reasoning*, and that these acts collapse into conception (T 1.3.7). Hume explains:

What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects....The act of the mind exceeds not a simple conceptions; and the only remarkable difference, which occurs on this occasion, is, when we join belief to the conceptions, and are persuaded of the truth of what we conceive (T 1.3.7).

From this passage, it is clear that Hume considers *conception* as an act of the understanding. If so, the representative distinction is less damaged by his comment that beliefs arise without “any new operation of the reason or imagination,” since Hume asserts that belief does “nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object” (T 1.3.7.5). Whatever conception consists of,

it is an act of the understanding and is therefore something that must deal with ideas, which can be defined by the representative distinction. Even if we accept that belief simply alters the conception of ideas and adds force to them, we are still left with the question of *why* and *how* we assent to beliefs—and the representative distinction cannot account for this. The representative distinction can go as far as explaining why a belief *feels* different to the mind than a mere idea, but it cannot define or explain the mechanisms or motivations of assent.

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