Hume, Belief and Personal Identity
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Hume in the *Treatise* was proud of his view of belief. ‘This act of the mind has never yet been explain’d by any philosopher’ (T97n1), he says early in the discussion; and he congratulates himself on the coherence of his views, ‘the agreement of these parts, and the necessity of one to explain another’ (T154). But in the Appendix, only twenty-one months later, he confesses to difficulties. ‘Even when I think I understand the subject perfectly, I am at a loss for terms to express my meaning’ (App628). Famous for the second thoughts on personal identity, the Appendix actually takes more than twice as long modifying the theory of belief, admitting even an outright ‘error’ (App636). By the time of the *Enquiry*, another eight years on, Hume’s anxieties seem to have got the better of him altogether. Section V Part II is introduced as containing ‘speculations, which, however accurate, may still retain a degree of doubt and uncertainty.’ ‘The following enquiries may well be understood, though it be neglected’ (E47).

Abstracting from many other respects in which Hume’s formulations vary,2 I shall argue that Hume offers us three kinds of conception of belief.3 Taking ‘steadiness and vivacity’ to represent the characteristic features of belief, there are three kinds of thing to which those features apply. Belief may be

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2 There are two other notable dimensions of variation. First, besides the terms ‘vivid’ and ‘steady’ to describe the characteristic feature of belief, Hume also uses ‘lively, forcible, firm’ (E49), ‘stronger’ and ‘more intense’ (Abs654)—terms which we cannot assume are equivalent. (Comments in Book II of the *Treatise*, for example, suggest that Hume wanted a distinction between ‘enliven[ing]’ an idea and ‘infix[ing]’ it in the imagination (T453).) Secondly, particularly in the *Treatise*, he sometimes makes it part of his definition of belief that it be ‘associated with a present impression’ (e.g. T96), and even that it ‘aris[e] only from causation’ (T107)—which suggests that Hume on these occasions is importing into his view of what belief consists in his view of when belief is justified. I shall say very little about these dimensions of variation. On the second, see John Passmore, *Hume’s Intentions* (London: Duckworth, 1952, 3rd edition, 1980), 61-64, 94-104.

3 The principal discussions are in T Iii.7-10, App623-32, Abs652-5 and E Section V Part II. As will emerge, the three views should probably not be called *theories* of belief—which would imply more systemativity and completeness than I would claim for all of them.
Hume, Belief and Personal Identity

(a) a steady and vivid idea,
(b) a steady and vivid conception of an idea,
(c) a feeling or sentiment (of steadiness and vivacity) which is ‘annexed to’ an idea (E48).

(I shall use ‘(A)’, ‘(B)’ and ‘(C)’ to refer to the corresponding views of the nature of belief.)

The puzzle is not so much that Hume should have changed his mind, as that neither before nor after his change of mind did Hume have a stable view. In the Treatise he seems to have held both (A) and (B) without any sense of tension. The Appendix officially introduces (C) and gives reasons to doubt (A); but in the Enquiry all three views are still in evidence. The later work shows signs of exasperation as well as uncertainty, in repeating almost verbatim more than three pages from the Treatise and the Appendix. It is almost as though, when it came to the mechanics of belief, Hume still wanted a theory (cp. E14-15); but finding himself unable to write from scratch anything he could be fully confident of, he reused material that at least took a definite view, whatever its other shortcomings.

1. The Treatise and the first view of belief

My main concern is with the place of belief within Hume’s map of the mind. He calls a perception ‘whatever can be present to the mind’ (Abs647), and he divides perceptions into impressions and ideas. Into which category then do beliefs fall?

They cannot simply be ideas. First, when one person believes what another disbelieves, they ‘form all the same ideas’ (T95) but not the same beliefs; so ‘the idea of an object is an essential part of the belief of it, but not the whole’ (T94). Secondly, the best candidate idea that one might annex to a conception in order to turn it into a belief is that of existence; but in fact ‘the idea of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object’ (T94; cp. T I.ii.6). To think of God and to think of God as existing are one and the same thing; and it is not the same as believing that he exists. The Appendix adds a third reason: ‘The mind has command over all its ideas’; it does not have control over its beliefs; so belief cannot consist merely in ‘a new idea, annex’d to the conception’ (App623-24; cp. E47-48). The premiss that the mind has command over all its ideas is doubtful if ‘ideas’ include dreams and hallucinations (as the talk of ‘disease and madness’ at E17 would suggest); but it makes good sense if ‘ideas’ are what some people now call ‘propositional contents’ and Hume called ‘conceptions’. We

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4 Citing page and line numbers: pp. 49.10–50.2 of the Enquiry come almost verbatim from App629-30; pp. 50.2–50.11 from App625; and pp. 51.10–53.15 from T99-101. There are other places in the Enquiry where Hume reuses earlier material, but nowhere else does it form such a high proportion of the total on a topic. Interestingly, the ‘missing shade of blue’, on which Hume also had reason to feel himself embarrassed, is another case where he discharged his obligations by simply copying from his earlier text. (Enquiry pp. 20.27–21.26 correspond to T5-6.)
can form propositional contents at will; we cannot take up the attitude of belief towards
them at will; so indeed, beliefs are not simply propositional contents.

The Appendix adds reasons why belief cannot on the other hand involve simply an
additional impression: among other things, that ‘nothing ever enters into our conclusions but
ideas, or our fainter conceptions’ (App625).

What then is the nature of belief? Hume’s main argument (T95-96) is this:

(1) There are cases where one person believes exactly what another person disbelieves.
(2) The only way in which two ideas may differ while still being ideas of the same
object is in respect of ‘force and vivacity’.

Hence (3) Belief may be defined as ‘A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED
WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION’ (T96).

Apart from the demand in the conclusion for a ‘present impression’, the argument is close
to being valid. If we supply an additional premise,

(2’) Belief and disbelief involve nothing but ideas,

then (1) and (2) imply that belief and disbelief involve nothing but ideas differing only in
force and vivacity. And from there it is only a small step to the thought that of the two,
beliefs must be the livelier, and hence to the conclusion that belief is, precisely, a ‘lively
idea’. The premises are not uncontroversial, however, and we shall see that Hume himself
came to repudiate (2) explicitly, and (2’) implicitly.

Even in this first exposition, Hume seems to be pulled between the two views (A) and
(B) which I mentioned above. Some passages suggest that in belief and disbelief there are
two ideas, differing only in ‘force and vivacity’, as on view (A); others suggest that there is
only one idea but two different attitudes towards it, as on view (B). On the first view, belief
is a certain kind of idea; on the second it is a certain kind of conception of an idea. Hume’s
earlier statement that the difference ‘lies not in the parts or composition of the idea’ but ‘in
the manner in which we conceive it’ (T95) leans toward the second view, which will be
considered in detail later. (Cp. T96: belief ‘can only change the manner of our conceiving
[ideas]’.) But Hume comes down firmly on the side of view (A) in his definition and in many
other places. He defines belief as ‘A lively idea …’ (T96). He talks of how we ‘vary the idea
of a particular object’ (T96)—which presumably results in a different, if closely related, idea
of the same object. And later in the Treatise, he continues to describe belief as ‘nothing but a
strong and lively idea deriv’d from a present impression’ (T105), and as ‘a lively idea related
to a present impression’ (T110; cp. T427).

The principal attraction of this view lies in its coherence with the rest of Hume’s picture

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5 The demand may seem to come out of the blue at this point in the argument. Hume has prepared for
it in the preceding section, however, in the last lines of T93.
of the mind. The objects of the mind vary along a single dimension of force and vivacity. At the opening of the *Treatise*, ideas and impressions are distinguished by their degrees of vivacity; memories and beliefs are later placed at intermediate positions on the same scale. Just as ‘the belief or assent, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present’ (T86), so the belief that attaches to our ideas of the unobserved consists merely in the vivacity of those ideas.\(^6\) Perhaps the greatest attraction for Hume is that this fits so neatly into a mechanical theory of the production of beliefs. Section I.iii.8 develops a theory of how it is by the *communication of vivacity* from an impression present to the senses or memory that our idea of the (unobserved) cause or effect comes to be a belief, rather than a mere conception. When I find a watch on a desert island (to use an example from E26), and come to believe that someone has been there before, there are two processes at work—the association of perceptions, and the communication of vivacity. Given a constant conjunction of (perceptions of) watches and people, the association of ideas (a form of habit) gives me a propensity to form an idea of a person when presented with an impression of a watch. That idea is transformed into a belief, by receiving some of the vivacity that attaches to my impression of the watch: ‘tis from some present impression we borrow that vivacity, which we diffuse over the correlative idea (T154). This communication of vivacity occurs not just between causally related ideas, but also in a lesser degree between ideas related by contiguity or resemblance (T I.iii.9; cp. E49–54)—a process which Hume describes in marvellously picturesque terms.\(^7\) In probabilistic reasoning, ‘the vivacity of thought’ can even be ‘divided and split in pieces’ (T129; cp. T134): instead of one strong belief (say, that some side or other of a die will come up), I may have six weak and unvivid beliefs that side 1 will come up, that side 2 will, and so on.

The unity of Hume’s thought here extends even into his view of the passions and of morality. Suppose that I believe that another person has a headache and I offer her some aspirin. How can a pain that I do not feel serve as a spur to my own action? Hume offers a theory. ‘In sympathy there is an evident conversion of an idea into an impression. This conversion arises from the relation of objects to ourself.’ (T320) As at all times, I have an impression of myself. (‘Tis evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us’ (T317.).) The other person is related to me by resemblance, and perhaps also contiguity. The vivacity of my impression of myself will be conveyed to related ideas—hence my idea of her pain becomes ‘so inliven’d as to become the very sentiment or passion’ (T319). It is almost as though I feel her pain, and this impression in me

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\(^6\) A subsidiary argument for Hume’s view of belief uses one similarity between impressions and beliefs to prove a further similarity: beliefs have similar effects to impressions; the effects of impressions are due to their vivacity; so beliefs must resemble impressions in vivacity (v. T119-20; cp. T103). The argument rests on Hume’s principle that ‘the same cause always produces the same effect, and the same effect never arises but from the same cause’ (T173)—a principle which leaves it obscure how we could ever say that cars break down for a variety of reasons.

\(^7\) See the talk of vividness being conveyed ‘as by so many pipes or canals’ (T122, cp. T386), quoted below in fn. 26.
enlivened idea of the pain) is capable of serving as an impulse to action, therefore, just as my own pains are. (For more details, see e.g. T289, 317-20, 380, 386, 575-76.) As belief is central to Hume’s philosophy of the understanding, so sympathy is central to his moral philosophy: it is ‘the chief source of moral distinctions’ (T618). What is remarkable is that Hume traces both belief and sympathy to the same process: the communication of vivacity from an impression to an idea. In the *Treatise*, vivacity and the communication of it are the fundamental notions of Hume’s whole philosophy of mind.8

The simplicity of Hume’s system is bound to arouse suspicion. Can such architectural symmetry have been achieved without grinding away some of the natural irregularities of the building materials? In systematizing the mind, has Hume not distorted it?9 With the theory of belief, the most important of established lines of criticism concern (a) Hume’s imagistic conception of thought and (b) his attempt to characterize the principal differences between impressions, beliefs and mere conceptions along a single dimension—whether of force, vivacity, steadiness or anything else. Without being able to consider these fully, it is worth taking one criticism in each category and seeing how Hume can respond to the first round of fire, though it is doubtful how much longer he could defend his position.

A major objection is that the content of at least some beliefs could not possibly be carried simply by an image, which is what Hume conceives his ideas to be. Take for example the thoughts that all tomatoes are red, that the particular tomatoes now being thought of are red, and that all tomatoes if thought of are red: the differences between these thoughts can hardly be fully captured by whatever differences there are in the images they bring to mind.

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8 Hume makes much of the analogy between the two cases: ‘What is principally remarkable in this whole affair is the strong confirmation these phenomena [in the domain of the passions] give to the foregoing system concerning the understanding, and consequently to the present one concerning the passions; since these are analogous to each other’ (T319, cp. T380).

9 ‘Is this the man that Nature made? … This is a puppet, surely, contrived by too bold an apprentice of Nature, to mimic her work. It shows tolerably by candle light; but, brought into clear day, and taken to pieces, it will appear to be a man made with mortar and a trowel.’ Thomas Reid, *Inquiry into the Human Mind* (1764), repr. in Sir William Hamilton, ed., *The Works of Thomas Reid*, 6th edn. (Edinburgh, 1863), i.103.
Hume, Belief and Personal Identity

Hume might reply, however, using his theory of abstract ideas (from T I.i.7, cp. E158fn.), according to which a general term ‘raises up an individual idea, along with a certain custom’ (T21, my emphasis). The difference between the various tomato-thoughts lies, he might say, not just in the ideas brought to mind by the words, but in the associated customs. This opens many further questions—how far Hume can really claim to have an account of generality in thought, as well as in language; how far the theory implies that, for consistency, Hume should then be saying that the contents of our beliefs are ideas with associated ‘customs’, rather than simply ideas; and how far the ‘ideas’ really do any work once the ‘customs’ have been brought into play. All these are questions I shall leave aside. Whatever suspicions we may have that Hume could not answer them satisfactorily, it is worth noticing that his imagistic conception of beliefs cannot be fully assessed in isolation from his theory of abstract ideas.

An objection in the second category is this. Can the vivacity of an idea be changed without the content changing? Maybe—to build on the colour comparison in T96—an idea of a blue vase can be brightened up without coming to represent a different shade of blue. But what of the idea of a bright blue vase? Can that be brightened up without coming to represent an even brighter blue vase? However we take the talk of force and vivacity—and there are certainly times when Hume did not want to place too much weight on it—as long as the characteristics of belief are intrinsic features of an idea, they seem liable to affect its content.

Here again preliminary replies are available. First, the experiences of looking at a scene with one eye and with two eyes may (if the case is carefully enough constructed) differ intrinsically without differing in pictorial content. It seems possible therefore that two images or ideas might in a similar way differ intrinsically without differing in what they represent. The question would remain however, whether variation in that kind of respect could really constitute the crucial difference between perception, belief and mere conception—a question on which I can only feel considerable doubt. A second defence of Hume is also available: two photographs printed from one negative may differ in brightness (or indeed in tinge of colour) while in a perfectly good sense representing the very same scene. And we are often quite capable of adjusting to these differences so as to recognize the sameness of the properties represented, and to recognize which properties they are. The point is an important one, and Hume could have appreciated an analogue of it in the domain of painting; but it is not enough to get Hume out of difficulty. It may be the case that a fainter image and a darker image can be recognized to represent the same scene; but that requires a state of mind that consists in more than the mere having of the images in question.

10 This is especially clear in the Enquiry. ‘I confess, that it is impossible perfectly to explain this feeling or manner of conception. ... And in philosophy, we can go no farther than assert, that belief is something felt by the mind, which distinguishes the ideas of the judgement from the fictions of the imagination.’ (E49) But this still does not stop Hume giving a ‘description of this sentiment’ which begins ‘vivid, lively, forcible …’ (E48).
(perhaps the state of mind includes also the taking or treating of each image in a certain way). Hume, however—at least when developing this first conception of belief—seems to want belief, like perception, to consist merely in the having of an image or idea.\footnote{David Pears makes beautifully clear the danger that change of image may change content. (See \textit{Hume's System} (Oxford University Press, 1990), 49-49, cp. 40-44.) Unlike me, however, Pears thinks Hume clearly ‘wanted to avoid the notion that strength and vivacity are pictorial properties of ideas of belief’ (50). In support Pears quotes from T96, where Hume is insisting that the content of a belief may be the same as that of a disbelief. Unfortunately, however, this will not establish that Hume had a non-pictorial conception of liveliness unless we also know that Hume himself was alive to the danger that any pictorial property would affect the content, and that he thought that danger could not be averted. I think he was aware of the danger, but believed that vivacity was uniquely capable of averting it; and as I have been arguing here, there are reasons—insufficient though they are—to support that view. On Pears’s own understanding of force and vivacity, see the end of Section 1 below.}

Hume may have imagined he could escape the challenges so far. But there is an criticism within the second category, the force of which Hume himself seems to have acknowledged. It was raised by Hume’s kinsman, Henry Home, a prominent advocate and writer on anthropology, criticism and philosophy, who as a Scottish judge from 1752 took the title of Lord Kames. In the \textit{Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion}, a sympathetic reply to much of Hume’s \textit{Enquiry}, Kames points out that vivacity cannot be enough to distinguish belief from mere conception. On Hume’s view, ‘credulity and a lively imagination would be always connected, which does not hold in fact. Poetry and painting produce lively ideas, but they do seldom produce belief.’\footnote{Henry Home, \textit{Lord Kames, Essays on the Principles of Morality and Natural Religion} (Edinburgh, 1751), Part II, Essay I, p. 222. (The first two editions were published anonymously; the third he acknowledged.) Kames continues later: ‘Can any man doubt, who has not an hypothesis to defend, that poetry makes a stronger impression than history? Let a man, if he has feelings, attend the celebrated Garrick in the character of Richard, or in that of king Lear; and he will find, that dramatic representations make strong and lively impressions, which history seldom comes up to.’ (pp. 223-4)}

It may well have been this objection that actually prompted Hume in the Appendix to the \textit{Treatise} to renounce the view that the only way in which ideas may differ while still being ideas of the same object is in respect of ‘force and vivacity’ (premiss (2) above)—thus renouncing his first view of belief.\footnote{Though Kames’s \textit{Essays} were not published until 1751, he met Hume shortly after the publication of the \textit{Treatise}. According to Boswell, Kames ‘shewed him his Objections, and David, who was not very ready to yield, acknowledged he was right in every one of them’ (G. Scott and F. A. Pottle, eds., \textit{Private Papers of James Boswell from Malahide Castle} (New York, privately printed, 1928-34), vol. 15, 273-74; quoted in D. F. Norton, \textit{David Hume—Common-Sense Moralist, Sceptical Metaphysician} (Princeton University Press, 1982), p. 174). Unfortunately, we have no direct account of what those earlier objections were.} The Appendix admits that ‘poetical enthusiasm’ produces vivid ideas, but does not produce belief (App630-31). Vivacity of an idea, therefore, cannot constitute belief. ‘Had I said, that two ideas of the same object can only be different by their different \textit{feeling}, I shou’d have been nearer the truth.’ (App636)

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ways this suggests both the second and third conceptions, which I shall take up in the sections that follow.

I have been working with a fundamentally pictorial interpretation of terms like ‘force and vivacity’. I should comment briefly on two other interpretations. Some have treated force and vivacity as (i) a disposition to a certain kind of behaviour, or to a certain kind of judgment; others have treated it as (ii) a disposition of the mind to keep hold of and not to release the idea in question. (The first is a tendency to a certain kind of behaviour, the second a tendency to a certain kind of mental act.) On the first view, Hume would be recognizing a point stressed in Ryle and Wittgenstein: that at least some beliefs need to be understood as dispositions. This view cannot be ascribed to Hume. Hume lays great weight upon the ‘Influence of belief’: he devotes the whole of section 1.3.10 in the Treatise to it, and treats beliefs as ‘the governing principles of all our actions’ (App629). But this tendency to influence action is not to be identified with ‘force and vivacity’; rather, it is supposed to derive from it. The influence of beliefs is said to ‘proceed from’ their force and vivacity (T119), and to ‘flow from’ their solidity and force (T121). When Hume talks of vivacity and force, he hopes to have found an intrinsic feature of our ideas which in turn is responsible for that influence. Suggestion (ii) is more promising: Hume talks of belief as ‘a firmer conception, or a faster hold, that we take of the object’ (App627), and that does suggest a tendency not to lose hold of the idea. The difficulty here is not with the idea that this conception weighed with Hume, or that he may have had it in mind when he talked of force and solidity. The difficulty is with the idea that this can have been Hume’s dominant and fundamental conception of what was distinctive of belief. The vivacity attaching to memory and beliefs is supposed to be the same (though in lesser degree) as that attaching to impressions and also the hallucinations of ‘disease and madness’ (E17). The common feature of these vivid images can hardly be unalterability—some hallucinations are vivid but highly changeable—;

14 H. H. Price and D. M. Armstrong find this dispositional conception in Hume, though not on its own. For Price, though the occurrence conception of belief dominates, there are hints in Hume also of something like R. B. Braithwaite’s view that the belief that p is a tendency to act as if it were true that p. ‘It might be suggested that this is what the “forcefulness” or “strength” of the believed idea would amount to — its tendency or liability to affect one’s action’ (H. H. Price, Belief (London: Allen & Unwin, 1969), 187). Armstrong holds a similar view: Hume ‘wavers between’ characterizing belief by this kind of behavioural effect, and characterizing it by ‘internal difference’ (D. M. Armstrong, Belief, Truth and Knowledge (Cambridge U. P., 1973), 71). John Brice raises an objection to Armstrong similar to my own, in Hume’s Philosophy Mind (Edinburgh U. P. / Princeton, 1980), 122.

15 David Pears seems to hold this second kind of view: the vivacity of memory must be a ‘behavioural property’ of the image, e.g. its being ‘stubborn and difficult to alter’ (Hume’s System, 44; see also, on the force and vivacity of belief, pp. 49-50). Macnabb seems to finds traces of both (i) and (ii) in Hume: he mentions the conception of belief as a disposition to assent (though Macnabb ‘cannot honestly say for Hume that he clearly recognised’ that this is what people ‘most often’ mean by belief), and he also talks of belief as being ‘fix[ed] ... in the mind to the exclusion of rival ideas’. See D. G. Macnabb, David Hume (London: William Collins, 1951), 75-76.
whereas one could easily take it to be pictorial vividness. Beliefs are being fitted into a continuum of cases already characterized by impressions on one side and ‘faint images’ on the other (T1); the fundamental conception really does seem to be pictorial, and in applying it to belief, Hume continues to make comparisons with the ‘liveliness or brightness’ of a particular shade of colour (T96). Hume might have been better off using a behavioural property as the ‘vivacity’ attaching to belief, and there are certainly hints that such a conception came to weigh with him; but it was not his fundamental conception, nor the one that plays the dominant part in his mechanisms of the mind. As we have already seen, Hume became increasingly dissatisfied with the idea of taking vivacity alone to characterize belief; but the other two suggestions discussed here would not have satisfied him as general substitutes for vivacity either.

2. The second view: a vivid conception of an idea

We have already seen suggestions in the Treatise of a second view, on which belief would consist in a certain kind of conception of an idea. Belief is ‘only a strong and steady conception of any idea’ (T97n); belief is ‘a more vivid and intense conception of an idea’ (T103). These phrases are ambiguous if we allow that ‘idea’ may sometimes apply not just to an idea, but (as famously in Locke) to what an idea is of. Hume might be saying either that belief is a more vivid conception of an object (i.e. a more vivid idea of that object), or that belief is a more vivid conception of an idea of an object. The former is the view I have already found in Hume; but as we shall see, the latter is definitely present as well.

Hume often talks of belief as a ‘manner of conceiving’. How does this fit with the two views so far identified? Strictly, a manner of conceiving can hardly be literally identical with either an idea or a conception of an idea. (A manner cannot be identical with an individual thing.) But they can be closely linked: conceiving in the appropriate manner may be identical with having an appropriate kind of idea: ‘conceiving vividly’ might be applied to having a vivid idea (i.e. thinking of an object vividly, as on view (A)) or alternatively to having a vivid conception of an idea (i.e. conceiving an idea of an object vividly, as on view (B)). The idiom is compatible in principle, therefore, with both views, and it is actually with them both. Sometimes belief varies ‘the manner, in which we conceive any object’ (T96, my emphasis)—which fits with view (A). At other times belief changes ‘the manner of our conceiving [the ideas]’ (T96), and we ‘conceive that idea in a stronger and more lively manner’ (T116, my emphasis)—which fits with view (B). I shall therefore treat those passages which treat belief as a certain ‘manner of conceiving’ as a variant of the views we have already identified.

Hume shows no embarrassment at the ambiguity in his expression. Perhaps he thought

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16 Further examples are these: ‘the mind … applies itself to the conception of the related idea with all the force and vivacity it acquir’d from the present impression’ (T99); ‘belief is nothing but a more forcible and vivid conception of an idea’ (T107); and cp. T119-20.
the differences between views (A) and (B) unimportant. One passage, however, constitutes unambiguous support for the second view, and shows how radically it differs from the first. Hume has been explaining how causal reasoning results in a belief, by the communication of vivacity from an impression present to the senses or memory. An objection occurs to him: surely I can reason from a mere idea to a belief (e.g. from my idea of red to the belief that I once had an impression of red), using the principle that all ideas are derived from impressions. But that forces the question: where does the vivacity of the resultant belief come from, if there is no impression present which can have supplied it?

[T]o this I answer very readily, from the present idea. For as this idea is not here consider’d, as the representation of any absent object, but as a real perception in the mind, of which we are intimately conscious, it must be able to bestow on whatever is related to it the same quality, call it firmness, or solidity, or force, or vivacity, with which the mind reflects upon it, and is assur’d of its present existence. The idea here supplies the place of an impression, and is entirely the same, so far as regards our present purpose. (T106)

An impression or ‘vivid perception’ is therefore, after all, not needed to support a belief—an idea will do as well, as long as the mind reflects upon it with force and vivacity. And we may presume that the vivacity associated with the resultant belief is of the same character: it is the mind’s reflection upon the idea that is lively, rather than the idea itself.

This passage marks a substantial departure from the first view of belief—one that results in tension, as we shall see, with Hume’s official theory of the mind. Instead of merely one dimension of variation among perceptions, Hume is now allowing two. Instead of classifying perceptions simply as more or less vivid, he is classifying them as (a) more or less vivid in themselves, and (b) more or less vividly apprehended by the mind. As a result, he is in a position to distinguish a vivid perception faintly apprehended, from a faint perception vividly apprehended: the idea of red in the example above (from T106) will be an instance of the latter type, and it will be the vivacity of the mind’s apprehension that is transferred to the associated idea, not the (non-existent) vivacity of the object of that apprehension.

This second view harmonizes well with Hume’s description of belief as arising from a general ‘disposition’ of the mind, when it has been ‘elevate[d] and enlivene[d]’ by a present impression, which has the effect that ‘every action, to which the mind applies itself, will be more strong and vivid, as long as that disposition continues’ (T98). The suggestion is that the

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17 The same apparatus may be able to provide Hume with a reply to the accusation that he cannot make a proper distinction between the idea of a hat and the idea of the idea of a hat. On the present suggestion (which is one way of developing the hint in the last paragraph of T Liii.8, p. 106), Hume could distinguish these as the vivid apprehension of a faint perception of a hat, and the faint apprehension of a faint perception of a hat. The mind boggles at the thought of how the theory might ramify.
mind is, so to speak, activated or ‘hyped up’ by the presence of an impression, and everything in the mind is thereby coloured or brightened up. The idea has its problems, in that we might end up with too many beliefs on sunny days with vivid impressions and too few on dull ones—but it has the virtue of making belief a matter more of the mind’s attitude, than of its object.

This second view evidently escapes one of the main problems that faced view (A): that a change in the vivacity of an idea is liable to change its content. Jonathan Bennett puts the objection in an extreme form: Hume’s view ‘implies, for example, that there is no difference between believing that the Sahara is warm and entertaining the thought that it is extremely hot.’ This is a fair challenge to view (A), but it completely misses (B): a vivid apprehension of the idea that the Sahara is warm is clearly different from a faint apprehension of the idea that it is extremely hot. But if this second view has its advantages, it also has what Hume was bound to regard as disadvantages—to which we shall return after setting out the third view.

3. The third view: a sentiment or feeling of belief

When in the Appendix Hume abandons what I identified as premiss (2) of his main argument for the first view, he suggests a different principle: ‘Had I said, that two ideas of the same object can only be different by their different feeling, I shou’d have been nearer the truth.’ (App636) His new suggestion is that ‘belief consists merely in a certain feeling or sentiment …. When we are convinc’d of any matter of fact, we do nothing but conceive it, along with a certain feeling, different from what attends the mere reveries of the imagination.’ (App624)

In some ways this is a development of view (B). On Hume’s conception of the mind as perfectly aware of itself, we would expect that if the mind conceives an idea in a vivid manner (as on view (B)), then it would be aware of doing so, and it would therefore (as on view (C)) have a particular ‘feeling or sentiment’ of that vividness of conception. The terms that characterised the idea in view (A), and the conception of the idea in view (B), reappear to characterise the feeling in view (C): ‘this different feeling I endeavour to explain by calling it a superior force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness’ (App629). But any

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19 Are ‘sentiments’ impressions or ideas? Other passages suggest that Hume uses the words ‘sentiment’ and ‘feeling’ interchangeably for what he at other times calls impressions. ‘We always find that [our thoughts or ideas] resolve themselves into such simple ideas as were copied from a precedent feeling or sentiment’ (E19). We distinguish vice and virtue ‘by means of some impression or sentiment they occasion … tho’ this feeling or sentiment is commonly so soft and gentle, that we are apt to confound it with an idea’ (T470; cp. T472).
20 ‘Since all actions and sensations of the mind are known to us by consciousness, they must necessarily appear in every particular what they are, and be what they appear’ (T190).
Hume, Belief and Personal Identity

ascription of a view to Hume at this point is necessarily tentative. Hume’s statements present problems of interpretation. (How can a feeling literally be called force, vivacity or solidity? Presumably it must be a feeling of force, vivacity or solidity. And how can one have a feeling of force, vivacity or solidity tout simple? Force, vivacity and solidity are properties, and it is hard to see how you can have a feeling of force, vivacity or solidity without having a feeling of the force, vivacity or solidity of something in particular. What then is the something? On the suggestion of this paragraph it is the conception of the idea that one feels to be forceful, lively and solid, but a good measure of interpretation goes into the suggestion.) Hume himself is diffident. ‘Provided we agree about the thing, ’tis needless to dispute about the terms.’ (App 629) But though he thinks ‘a definition of this sentiment’ may be ‘a very difficult, if not an impossible task’ (E48), this does not stop him offering ‘a description’ of it (E49).

In the Enquiry, this third view (C) is the official line. ‘The difference between fiction and belief lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter’. (E48) What is surprising is to find the other two views present as well, the first of which was effectively repudiated eight years before, in the Appendix to the Treatise. As on view (A), belief is described as ‘a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain’ (E49). And Hume repeats an expression of view (B) from the Appendix: ‘belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the manner of their conception, and in their feeling to the mind’ (E49=App 629). Why did Hume keep all three views in play, yet refuse to acknowledge any of them with confidence? In each case, Hume was, I think, under the influence of both a strong reason to espouse the view, and a strong reason to reject it.

The problem with the first view has already been noted: there are cases of vivid ideas (for example in poetical enthusiasm) that yet are not beliefs. But Hume was also under pressure to keep the theory. On his official view, the objects of the mind are ideas and impressions; only if beliefs are simply a special variety of idea or impression, can the official view be literally sustained.

The pressures with the second view are more subtle. Its attraction lies in the idea that the difference between believing something and merely entertaining the idea of it consists, as we might say (in the modern idiom), in our attitude to the idea, or, as Hume puts it, in the way in which we conceive it. The first difficulty is relatively superficial, involving a double use of the word ‘idea’. An idea may be either what one has when one has a thought, or instead the content of such a thought (something that can also be the object of another propositional attitude). Belief is a certain kind of idea, according to the first use—and maybe a vivid one—but it is only its content that is an idea, according to the second. A parallel problem may even arise with the word ‘content’. One may ask, ‘What are the contents of the mind?’ and reply in Humean fashion, ‘Ideas and impressions’. But then what about beliefs? They cannot be ideas—for one idea may be common to a belief, a disbelief and a mere conception. On the other hand, they cannot involve anything else either—since ‘there is nothing ever enters into our conclusions but ideas’ (App 625). So they end up involving a way
of conceiving or else ‘a peculiar feeling’, that mysteriously counts as neither an idea nor an impression. These problems arise partly from a double use of these terms. As one might say, deliberately oscillating between them: the contents of the mind are more than just contents. One can have different ideas simply by having different attitudes to the same idea. And if we then reexamine the claim that the mind consists simply of ideas and impressions, it begins to seem less of a datum: if ‘idea’ is used in the second sense (for propositional contents), then the mind will also include attitudes to ideas; and if ‘idea’ is used in the first sense (for beliefs), then the mind will contain other items (like mere conceptions and disbeliefs) too.

4. The second view and Hume’s theory of personal identity

So far, this might seem to improve the chances of success for the second view. It would seem open to Hume to amend his theory to: ‘the mind consists of impressions, ideas and attitudes to ideas (or ways of having them)’. But Hume would I think have been unhappy with this. For such ‘ways of having ideas’ would seem to involve the mind’s standing in a certain relation to an idea: the mind would conceive the idea vividly, the idea would present itself to the mind in a vivid manner. And to allow an irreducible relation between the mind on the one hand and its ideas on the other would to Hume have smacked of Cartesianism. The mind that stood in this relation to ideas would be in danger of turning into a ‘Cartesian’ self, a substance that was merely the supposed support of the properties of the self.

I shall set out quickly the disagreement between Hume and Descartes on the nature of the self, and then investigate how deep are the difficulties that Hume’s view poses for his view (B) of belief. I shall try to unearth the source of Hume’s theory of the self—ironically in a misapplication of a good Cartesian principle—, before ending with the suggestion that if we set aside that flawed theory of the self, then view (B) emerges, at least in structure, as an attractive conception of belief.

One of the main motivations for the theory of personal identity in the Treatise is Hume’s desire to rebut Descartes’s view of the mind—though he can hardly be said to have understood it. There are many aspects to Descartes’s view.21 But the main object of Hume’s attack was the idea that the mind was a substance (or as we might say, a ‘self-sufficient thing’), and thoughts were ‘modes’ of it (or as we might say, its ‘properties’): a mind could have different thoughts at different times rather as a piece of wax could have different shapes at different times.22 Hume’s reply, in short, is that he is unaware of any ‘self’ endowed with ‘perfect identity and simplicity’ which somehow supports the existence of his

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21 There is a good general discussion in Chapter 5 of John Cottingham, Descartes (Oxford: Blackwell, 1986).
22 See e.g. Descartes, Principles of Philosophy, i.64.
particular perceptions; indeed,\textsuperscript{23} whatever others may find in themselves, Hume is ‘certain there is no such principle in’ him (T252).\textsuperscript{24} ‘Setting aside,’ he says with irony, ‘some metaphysicians ...’, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.’ (T252) The difficulty this poses for the theory of belief is that, if ideas and impressions literally ‘constitute the mind’ (T253), then there hardly seems room to talk, as view (B) does, of the different ways in which the mind may apprehend or ‘reflect upon’ an idea.

Critics have pointed before to places where Hume’s science of the mind threatens to conflict with the bundle theory.\textsuperscript{25} In some cases the threat is fairly easily averted. The idea of time, like that of space, arises ‘not ... from a particular impression’, but ‘from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind’ (T36). But there seems a good prospect of reconciling this with the bundle theory: the ‘manner’ in which temporally or spatially extended perceptions appear to the mind may be reducible to the (temporal and spatial) relations of perceptions (or parts of perceptions) to other perceptions in the bundle—rather than requiring irreducible relations of perceptions to the mind.

A second threat arises from Hume’s talk of propensities of the mind, for example to ‘spread itself on external objects’ (T167) and to ‘feign the continu’d existence of the perceptions of our senses’ (T254, cp. 208). But such propensities can be reconciled with the bundle theory: we need only say, for example, that minds, that is, 	extit{bundles of ideas}, are of such a kind that when an internal impression of necessity occurs in a bundle, ideas of a corresponding necessity in external objects tend to occur in the bundle also. There is no need for this feature of ideas and impressions to be grounded in 	extit{something else} (such as a mind over and above its impressions and ideas)—it is simply a brute fact about ideas and

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{23} In \textit{The Mind of God and the Works of Man} (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), Edward Craig plays down this further claim (v. especially Ch. 2 §5). Hume is principally concerned, he thinks, to show that we have no good reason to believe in the existence of such a self, rather than that there is definitely no such thing. I find this very doubtful. Hume insists, over and over again, and in widely separated places, that impressions and ideas are self-sufficient existences, capable of existing on their own—which would make no sense if he believed that impressions and ideas might really, for all he knew, only be modes of a real self. The suggestion that Hume is concerned here with epistemology \textit{rather than} metaphysics is hard also to reconcile with Hume’s use of principles like ‘Whatever is clearly conceiv’d may exist’ (T233)—for these principles seem designed precisely to bridge the gap between epistemology and metaphysics.

\textsuperscript{24} Hume’s injustice to Descartes begins here: Descartes never claimed that one was directly aware of the mind; rather, one is aware of thoughts, recognizes that thoughts cannot exist without a thinker, and then \textit{concludes} (as in the \textit{cogito}) to the existence of the mind. (See Descartes, \textit{Principles of Philosophy}, i.11 & 52.)

\textsuperscript{25} e.g. Norman Kemp Smith, \textit{The Philosophy of David Hume} (London: Macmillan, 1941), e.g. 49, 74; and Jane L. McIntyre, ‘Is Hume’s Self Consistent?’, in D. Norton, N. Capaldi, W. Robison, eds., \textit{McGill Hume Studies} (San Diego, Tex.: Austin Hill Press, 1979).
\end{footnotesize}
impressions that they tend to occur in those patterns, just as the gravitational attraction of bodies is a brute fact about them (—cp. T12-13).

The problem with the second view of belief is more serious. We cannot reinterpret the talk of the mind’s relation to an idea as a matter of the patterns in which ideas and impressions occur, for Hume has effectively denied that belief can be reduced to the having of impressions or ideas. Belief is not simply having an idea (—'The idea of an object is an essential part of it, but not the whole' (T94)—), and yet it does not involve an additional idea

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26 Jane McIntyre identifies another source of conflict (op. cit. previous note) that is also hard to resolve—harder, indeed, than she thinks. The conflict is this: ‘the force of custom in accounting for our beliefs and complex ideas seems to presuppose the continuing existence of a self underlying perceptions’ (p. 84); her proposal is that the conflict is only superficial, because the past perceptions which have given rise to a person’s present associations of ideas may actually persist. A bundle of perceptions can be said to learn from experience in that earlier perceptions persist among later perceptions; and ‘Perceptions that persist through various collections can, of course, influence any of the collections in which they occur’ (p. 87). There is a difficulty with this. It is unfortunate to require that the earlier perceptions that set up associations of ideas always continue in existence. May I not have a habit of associating watches with people without keeping in my present bundle my earlier perceptions of watches and people, or even memories of them? (After all, ‘the mind makes the transition without the assistance of memory’ (T104).) McIntyre talks at one point of ‘the underlying persistence of individual perceptions’ (p. 87, my emphasis); but if underlying presence is unconscious presence in the mind, that itself is hard to reconcile with Hume’s usual attitude that the mind is aware of those perceptions that it has.

I suspect in fact that if Hume has any conception of what mediates or carries the influence of experience from past to present, then it is a mechanical and physical model. As the mind has repeatedly proceeded from one perception to another, animal spirits have repeatedly taken a certain path in the brain, thereby opening up passages which make it easier for the animal spirits to flow along the same path again. Hume describes the communication of vivacity from impression to idea using this kind of image. ‘The vividness of the first conception diffuses itself along the relations, and is convey’d, as by so many pipes or canals, to every idea that has any communication with the primary one’ (T122). The same pipes figure in the mechanisms of sympathy, where ‘if I diminish the vivacity of the first conception, I diminish that of the related ideas; as pipes can convey no more water than what arises at the fountain’ (T386). John P. Wright has suggested that such passages are not merely figurative, but signs of a seriously meant physiological theory of the movement of ‘animal spirits’ which Hume inherited from Book II of Malebranche’s Recherche de la Vérité. (See John P. Wright, The Sceptical Realism of David Hume (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), Ch. 5, esp. pp. 216ff.) Hume could equally, of course, have found the root idea in Descartes’ Passions de l’âme (e.g. i.34, 36). However it was first suggested to Hume, this hydraulic picture is obviously hard to reconcile with the notion that mind is strictly only a bundle of ideas and impressions. At best Hume could take the view that perceptions in the mind are causally affected by patterns of occurrence in the brain, while being ontologically distinct and self-sufficient; but he would be left with the implication that the association of ideas occurs not because of intrinsic features of items in the mental realm, but because of activities at the level of the animal spirits in the brain.
or impression (e.g. App623-27). It is not even possible to interpret belief as a matter of the relation of an idea to the other ideas in the bundle. For Hume would surely insist that beliefs are ‘distinct existences’, which could exist on their own, just like any other perception (T207, 233, App634)—whereas if belief consisted ultimately in the relation of an idea to the rest of the bundle, then that belief would not be capable of existing (at least as a belief) independently of the rest.

Hume has good reasons and bad reasons for rejecting the Cartesian notion of a self. There are arguments of a familiar type suggesting that our impressions could never have furnished us with an idea of mental substance. (e.g. T232-33) But there is a more interesting argument. The Cartesian could not even save his notion of a substance by defining it as ‘something which may exist by itself’, because that definition ‘will never serve to distinguish substance from accident, or the soul from its perceptions.’ For, Hume insists, our perceptions are themselves self-sufficient things, so they would themselves by that definition count as substances. ‘Since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider’d as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence.’ (T233; cp. T107, 244; App634)

Hume is leaping out of the frying pan into the fire—abandoning an incoherent notion of the self for an incoherent notion of its thoughts. The idea that one of my perceptions—that pain I had on Monday morning—could exist, on its own, as the one object in the world, is very probably incoherent, and Hume certainly fails in his arguments to defend it. My ‘perceptions’ are indeed often (though not always) independent of each other—in the sense that I could believe that \( p \) without believing that \( q \), even though I actually believe both. But the implication that my belief that \( p \) is therefore a self-sufficient object independent of everything else, and capable of existing on its own, is fallacious. Two dents on a car door may be independent of each other, in that each could exist without the other; but this does not mean that either of them could exist without the door.\(^{27}\)

One source of the problem is Hume’s misuse of the Cartesian principle that ‘Whatever is clearly conceiv’d may exist’. Descartes allowed that whatever is clearly and distinctly conceived is possible, and used it to prove the real distinction between mind and body. But he insisted that simply to be able to think of \( a \) without \( b \) is not sufficient for proving that \( a \) could exist without \( b \)—the conception has to be clear and distinct, and of \( a \) as a complete thing. Descartes would deny the inference to the possibility of ideas’ existing on their own without the mind whose ideas they are—for we do not have a clear and distinct conception of a thought without its thinker. Thought and thinker differ, as Descartes puts it, modally, and not really.\(^{28}\) Hume on the other hand, though he usually demands a ‘clear’ idea, hardly

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\(^{28}\) Cp. Descartes Principles of Philosophy, i.60-61 and ff., and I Replies, AT VII.120-21.
treats this as a stringent additional demand: for him, whatever is distinguishable in thought (however casually) is separable, and may therefore exist separately.\(^{29}\)

What Hume is trying to do is to separate A’s thought from A—to abstract from How it is for A the How it is. The temptation to do this is finely described by Bernard Williams:

> We can say that the general form of a question about someone’s conscious state is *how is it for A?* Wondering whether A is in pain, I take up in imagination A’s point of view, and encounter from that point of view the possibilities that there is pain or not, that it does or does not hurt …. If I then revert to the third-personal or objective

\(^{29}\) There is an interesting tension between Hume’s use of this principle and his views on abstract ideas. One reason for his rejection of Lockean abstract ideas is that ‘the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself; nor the precise degree of any quality from the quality’ (T18). In getting a general idea, say, of the length of this line (which is something it shares with various other lines), what happens is not that we manage to separate or distinguish an idea of the line’s length from an idea of the line, but rather that we ‘consider [the line and its length] together, since they are in effect the same and undistinguishable; but still view them in different aspects, according to the resemblances of which they are susceptible’ (T25). It is a case of ‘partial consideration’ (T43), not of separation of ideas.

This view of abstract ideas leaves Hume open to an objection to his thesis of the self-sufficiency of perceptions: just as the length of a line is inseparable from the line, so also it might be that an impression or idea is inseparable from a mind; in both cases, if we imagine that we have a clear idea of the one without the other, we are wrong—we are actually only attending to the resemblance of the mind (or line) to other minds (or other lines) in some respects and not others. Hume at one point recognizes a challenge of this kind (T244-5): admitting that you cannot separate (as a self-sufficient item) the motion of a body from the body itself, he considers the objection that you similarly cannot separate a thought from its thinker—so a thought would be, in the ancient terminology, an ‘action’ of the soul and, in the modern, an ‘abstract mode’. Hume’s reply is dogmatic: ‘Our perceptions are all really different, and separable, and distinguishable from each other, and from every thing else, which we can imagine; and therefore ’tis impossible to conceive, how they can be the action or abstract mode of any substance’ (T245, my emphasis). He does point out a difference between the cases: ‘Motion to all appearance induces no real nor essential change on the body, but only varies its relation to other objects’, whereas the passage of ideas in a person over time does seem to constitute ‘a radical difference’. But this difference between the cases is irrelevant to Hume’s claim: change in the length of a tapeworm over time also seems a real, and not just relational, difference; yet Hume would not for that reason say that the length of the tapeworm at any one time could be separated from the tapeworm itself. In the argument of T245, the idea that the successive states of the person are independent of each other seems to have been confused with the idea that they are independent tout court; and the idea that over time there is strictly no persisting substance may have covertly supported Hume’s refusal to refer attributes to a substance even at a single time. The views on identity over time have their own problems (see e.g. T. Penelhum, ‘Hume on Personal Identity’, *Phil. Rev.*, 1955); my present points are that they lend no real support to the views on substance at a single time, and that the latter views are themselves in conflict with what Hume says about abstract ideas.
point of view, and try to form a conception from there of just what is in the world when A is in pain, the temptation is to try to write into the world, in some hazy way, the appropriate content of A’s experience—as we might naturally, but too easily say: the pain. But in taking the content of A’s experience, and putting it into the world as a thing we can conceive of as there, we are in effect trying to abstract from how it is for A, the how it is and leave it as a fact on its own, which however has the mysterious property that it is available only to A, and can only be known directly to A.\textsuperscript{30}

This is precisely what Hume does, and it is the main source of his problems with personal identity. Given simply a handful of how it is’ s, there can seem no place for A, except as a bundle of those contents, or else as a mistake. And yet to take A as such a bundle would seem to make his identity both artificial and fragile. Descartes would never have had the same trouble—for how it is for A would from the start be a mode, dependent on, and inseparable from the substance A—whatever the problems his conception of that purely mental substance may have on other accounts.

Williams replies to the misconception behind Hume’s move: ‘The only perspective on the contents of A’s consciousness is the perspective of A’s consciousness.’ Hence, ‘What we need as an objective fact in the world, conceivable from a third-personal point of view, is not the it is so of it is so for A, but it is so for A itself.’ The picture of self-sufficient mental contents, essentially independent of everything else in the world, such as the facts of physiology, speech and behaviour, is very probably incoherent: ‘If there were a class of autonomous items in the world which were the contents of consciousness, then there would have to be a coherent conception of the world from which just those items had been removed, leaving all those other facts as they were.’ And yet there seems no such conception.\textsuperscript{31}

There may be a special sense in which it is fine to say ‘A’s thought could exist even if A did not’, if we are using ‘thought’ for a special kind of abstract object—e.g. for a kind of belief that a may have and b may lack, and c may take a long time to acquire, which might therefore exist even if a didn’t have it. (Perhaps such a notion is involved when one person says to another: ‘You’ve obviously had that belief for longer than I have’.) But if we are using ‘thought’ for an individual mental content, then it cannot be separated from the person whose thought it is. The case is parallel to that of properties and their bearers: (given a suitable defence of the existence of universals or properties) redness might exist even if this post-box did not; but we can make no sense of the idea that the redness of this post-box could exist even if the post-box did not. The important point is that recognizing this dependence of thoughts on thinkers is one way to free ourselves of the image of the bare self, endowed with ‘perfect identity and simplicity’, which is the supposed bearer of those thoughts. It is Hume’s belief in the self-sufficiency of thoughts that makes him unable to see Descartes’ self


\textsuperscript{31} Williams, \textit{Descartes}, 295-96.
as anything other than a property-less substratum, a thing intrinsically without thoughts, which yet somehow ‘possesses’ them by the same sort of extrinsic relation as holds between me and my briefcase.\textsuperscript{32} That kind of conception of the self is dispensable, and indeed incoherent; in so far as Hume shies away from the second view of belief because it would commit him to just such a self standing in a relation of vivid apprehension to an idea, he is absolutely right to do so. But it is not the view that Descartes actually held.

A modern analogue of the second view can also escape Hume’s worries. The second view, in its most general form, is that belief consists in one’s standing in a certain relation to an idea. On a proper conception, the idea need not be a self-sufficient but essentially mental item, nor need the other term of the relation be a mysteriously simple and unchanging self. Some modern conceptions of belief as a propositional attitude can be seen then as developments of this second view. Belief might for example be a matter of standing in a certain relation to an idea, in the sense of proposition or Fregean thought.\textsuperscript{33} (So different people could literally believe the same thing.) And the thing that stands in that relation to the idea could simply be a person—a flesh-and-blood, talking, thinking thing—, not a ‘Cartesian self’. This is only one of many available views; the point is that the obstacles to the second view that existed for Hume with his theory of personal identity do not rule out all varieties of such a view for everyone.

In this section I have explored the problems that Hume’s second view of belief, as a vivid conception of an idea, encountered from his theory of personal identity. Hume never remarks on the conflict: my claims are (i) that there is a tension between the second view of belief and Hume’s theory of personal identity;\textsuperscript{34} (ii) (tentatively) that a dim awareness of

\textsuperscript{32} In actual fact, of course, Descartes conceived the self in no such way: it was a thing which had different thoughts at different times in the same common-or-garden way as a piece of wax has different shapes. The loss of a coherent conception of the relation of a substance to its modes and attributes (or as we would say, of a thing to its properties) extends in British philosophy from Locke to Russell (with the notable exceptions of Kames and to some extent Reid) and it is sad that it at least partly due to Descartes’ misleading comparison of it to the relation of a person to his clothes. (See e.g. Descartes, \textit{VI Replies}, AT VII.461.)

\textsuperscript{33} Hume does not make much of the notion of a proposition (indeed at T96-7n he makes a virtue of eroding the distinction between propositional and non-propositional contents). But Kames, before criticizing the detail of Hume’s theory, gives credit to it for making clear ‘that belief is not any separate action or perception of the mind, but a modification of our perceptions, or a certain manner of conceiving propositions’ (\textit{Essays}, 221, my emphasis). Kames’s conception of a proposition can hardly have been Frege’s conception of a thought; the terms indicate a family of related views. Kames’ fundamental criticism of Hume is that he should not assume that the ‘modification of the idea’ in question is a ‘lively conception’, for this is ‘but one of many modifications’ (223).

\textsuperscript{34} There is a question over how far the tension is present in the \textit{Enquiry}. In the Appendix to the \textit{Treatise}, Hume had some notoriously obscure second thoughts about personal identity, which leave it obscure even what disquieted him about his earlier theory, let alone what changes he wished to make. My own view is that Hume himself was unsure what to jettison and what to keep from the theory of
this may explain why Hume never made a formal declaration of the advantages of view (B) over view (A), even after he was committed (by App628) to renouncing the detail of the latter; and (iii) that nonetheless, of the two views, it is the theory of personal identity that is the more problematic, with its claim that ideas and impressions are independent self-sufficient things. Hume noticed correctly that an unchanging thought-less bearer of thoughts would be redundant; this left open two options—to say that thoughts belong to nothing, or to say that thoughts belong to something different. Hume took the first option, which clashes with view (B) of belief. The second option seems to me the more promising, and if the bearer of thoughts is nothing more objectionable than a person, then it is quite compatible with Hume’s aim of avoiding a mysteriously simple and unchanging self. View (B) is, however, more promising in form than content. It may be right to see belief as involving a subject standing in a relation to an object, but the most promising options are not the ones Hume favours. The object of the mind may need to be a state of affairs, a proposition, or perhaps an individual mental content, rather than Hume’s imagistic ‘ideas’; the relation in question surely cannot be force and vivacity of apprehension; and the subject may need to be a person, of a kind for which Hume never made provision.55

personal identity, and therefore no part of that theory fully ceased to have a hold on him in later years. Despite his reservations, therefore, the theory of the self will have continued to put pressure on view (B). (There are elements of the Treatise theory in Part IV of Hume’s later work, the Dialogues concerning Natural Religion. Philo argues that the ‘soul of man’ is ‘a composition of various faculties, passions, sentiments, ideas; united, indeed, into one self or person, but still distinct from each other,’—and he seems to have the agreement of Cleanthes. (See N. Kemp Smith, ed., Hume’s Dialogues concerning Natural Religion edition (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1947), p.158.) But this is moderate, both in tone and content, compared with the Treatise.)

It is interesting, however, that (A)—the view which most shows the pressure to make the objects of the mind vary along just the one dimension of vivacity—is dropped in the Appendix, at just the same time as Hume is backtracking on the doctrine of personal identity. It may be that Hume is more indulgent to views (B) and (C) thereafter partly because he has relaxed his commitment to that doctrine. My suggestion is that the Treatise doctrine of personal identity nonetheless continues to exercise some influence on him, and it would stop him firmly and fully espousing either (B) or (as I shall argue later) (C).

Large parts of the Treatise’s picture of the mind obviously survive into the Enquiry, for example: ‘We may divide all the perceptions of the mind into two classes or species, which are distinguished by their different degrees of force and vivacity’ (E18). Hume does not say that the mind is literally constituted by these perceptions; but if belief itself counts as a perception, then there is already the material to make Hume uncomfortable about view (B).

55 Norman Kemp Smith has also remarked on the tension between Hume’s view of belief as ‘a quality of this and that perception’ and his view of it as ‘an attitude of mind’, which correspond to what I have called views (A) and (B); and he links those views respectively to Newtonian and Hutchesonian (or roughly, mechanical and biological) elements in Hume’s approach to mental phenomena (The Philosophy of David Hume (London: Macmillan, 1941), 74). There are at least three divergences between us. First, whereas he takes the Hutchesonian view to be ‘the more fundamental in Hume’s thinking’
5. Difficulties with the Third View

The problems are more obvious with view (C), that belief is ‘merely a peculiar feeling or sentiment’ (App623). The first difficulty is whether to class the ‘feeling’ as an idea or an impression. It cannot be an additional idea (or else we could believe anything at will), so the natural view might seem to be that it is an additional impression. Hume immediately goes on, however, to scotch this suggestion. He produces four arguments. First, ‘It is directly contrary to experience’: in our beliefs, we have ideas that are ‘different to the feeling; but there is no distinct or separate impression attending them’ (App625). Secondly, ‘it must be allow’d, that the mind has a firmer hold’ of something it believes. So why look for anything else, ‘or multiply supposi ...’ (App626) Thirdly, we can cite causes for the ‘firm conception’ but not for any ‘separate impression’. Fourthly, we can explain all the effects of belief as those of ‘firm conception’; so we don’t need to suppose anything further.

Two things are interesting here. First, though he has only just introduced view (C), he is already (with the phrases ‘firm hold’ and ‘firm conception’) talking as if this third view were equivalent to (A) or (B). Secondly, and more importantly, Hume is rebutting with these four arguments a view that seems virtually impossible to distinguish from the proposal he himself has just made. The view he is rebutting is this:

belief, beside the simple conception, consists in some impression or feeling, distinguishable from the conception .... It is only annex’d to it, after the same manner that will and desire are annex’d to particular conceptions of good and pleasure.36 (App625)

The view he is proposing, which I label (C), is this:

belief consists merely in a certain feeling or sentiment .... When we are convinc’d of

(76), I find the Newtonian view and, with it, the bundle theory, to be (however unfortunately) the dominant one in Book I of the Treatise and, in particular, the discussion of belief. Secondly, Kemp Smith takes Hume’s theory of space and time as ‘manners of appearance’ to be irreconcilable with the bundle theory (49); I have argued above, however, that those ‘manners of appearance’ may be a matter simply of relations among perceptions, and it is only the second view of belief that really makes trouble for the bundle theory. Thirdly, Kemp Smith makes nothing of the passage at T105-6 which I find the one place where Hume unambiguously commits himself to irreducible relations between the mind and its objects. Rereading Kemp Smith’s discussion of this matter, however, has only served to impress upon me how much present-day discussion suffers from neglect of his work: how many striking ideas have been neither rebutted nor retained in later debate.

36 Hume’s rejection is shown in the sentence that follows: ‘... the following considerations will, I hope, be sufficient to remove this hypothesis’ (App625).
any matter of fact, we do nothing but conceive it, along with a certain feeling …
(App624)

What is supposed to be the difference between them? Both involve a ‘feeling’ in some way added to an idea. One might think the difference lay in the relation of the ‘feeling’ to the idea: on the rejected view, the relation would be more remote (the feeling is ‘only annex’d …’). But on the proposed view as it appears in the Enquiry, the sentiment or feeling is also merely ‘annexed’ to the belief, and the conception is only ‘attended with a feeling or sentiment’ (E48, my emphasis).

The essential point may be that Hume wants to distance himself from any view that makes the feeling ‘distinguishable’ from the conception. There would be good reasons for doing so; the problem is that, once again, there are elements in Hume’s general view of the mind that make it impossible for him to do so. One reason to reject a feeling of belief ‘distinguishable from the conception’ and merely ‘annexed’ to it, is that if there were such a thing, the feeling would presumably be able to occur on its own, detached from any conception. One could have feelings of belief, without there being anything believed.\(^\text{37}\) The problem with this idea is subtle. It is not that there is no such thing as being under the impression that you have a belief, without there being anything that you believe, in the sense intended. It is that there seems no prospect of constructing the belief that \(p\) out of that feeling together with the mere conception that \(p\). We may allow that there is a feeling of belief, in that if you believe that \(p\), you will often be aware that you believe that \(p\). But that feeling is derivative from the belief, not a component part of it.

This gives us reason not to invoke a feeling of belief ‘distinguishable from the conception’ and merely ‘annexed’ to it. But what is to be the Humean alternative? The suggestion might be that belief involves a feeling or sentiment that is \textit{intrinsically connected} with the conception, and not detachable from it. But how could Hume allow this? The general theory of the mind seems to forbid it: ‘since all our perceptions are different …, they are also distinct and separable … and may exist separately’. (T233) A feeling of belief would be distinguishable and different from the conception believed; it must therefore in Hume’s view be capable of existing on its own.\(^\text{38}\) There seems no alternative available to Hume, as

\(^{37}\) Bertrand Russell, following William James, seems to have believed in the existence of just such feelings: ‘a man’s soul may sweat with conviction, and he be all the time utterly unable to say what he is convinced of. It would seem that, in such cases, the feeling of belief exists unattached, without its usual relation to a content believed …. Much of what passes for revelation or mystic insight probably comes in this way’. (\textit{The Analysis of Mind} (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1921), 252)

\(^{38}\) It is interesting to see how the atomistic conception of the world—which is as central to Hume’s theory of the mind as it is to his views on causation—, reaches a \textit{reductio ad absurdum} first in the former area. Any theory which (like Hume’s—v. T20) insists on the independence of thoughts from their objects (or what they refer to) will have difficulty making sense of intentionality and reference. As long as the referents are ‘external’ objects, this consequence may seem tolerable; but when the referent of the thought is itself an idea, then the logical independence of these is less tolerable; and in the case of
Hume, Belief and Personal Identity

long as he is ready to employ in the way he did (rather than in Descartes’s more careful way) the principle that ‘Whatever is clearly conceiv’d may exist’ (T233).

I began with the question why Hume should not only have held different views of belief at different times, but also in the Enquiry have seemed to hold all three views at once and rather sheepishly. The simple answer is that there are close connections between the three kinds of view, so it was easy to slip between them. The more sophisticated answer is that Hume was under pressure from his general theory of the mind. The view of belief (A) as a vivid idea, though crude, had the virtue of simple compatibility with the picture of the mind as consisting of ideas and impressions; even after he backtracked in the face of the ‘poetical enthusiasm’, that picture (and many of the systematic parallels between impressions and beliefs, which Hume needed for his mechanics of belief) continued to exercise an influence on him and lead him back to the first view. The view of belief (B) as a vivid conception of an idea met some of the objections to the first view. Unfortunately, however, the suggestion of the mind’s standing in a certain relation to an idea would have seemed tainted with Cartesianism: the mind would have seemed in danger of being treated as something separate from its own perceptions. So whatever the attractions of the second view Hume always had reason to abandon it. I have argued that the root of the trouble lay in Hume’s mistaken theory of personal identity: a modern view of belief as a propositional attitudes is in some ways parallel to the second view, but freed of Hume’s view that ideas are substances, it is under no compulsion to misconstrue the mind that takes attitudes to thoughts as a thought-less bearer of thoughts. The second view has its virtues; if we ask why Hume was diffident in his affirmation of it, we need perhaps look no further than the picture of personal identity which would have led Hume to reject it. As for the view of belief (C) as a sentiment or feeling: Hume’s problem is to stop the view from collapsing into the view that belief consists in a separable impression merely annexed to the idea. The latter is a view that Hume himself rejects, and I have added a further reason of my own (—that there is no separable ‘feeling of belief’—); but it seems impossible finally for Hume to stop the collapse. Driven once again by his general conviction of the independence and self-sufficiency of all the contents of the mind, Hume is incapable of giving a place to a feeling that cannot be logically detached from the idea to which it is directed. The third view too, therefore, was one which Hume had serious, if suspect, reasons to reject.39

belief, it seems quite unacceptable. In the belief that $p$, the attitude element which refers to a thought (rather as ‘That’s true’ does) can hardly be logically independent of the thought.

David Pears develops some further worries about Hume’s inability to make sense of intentionality, in Hume’s System, 52.

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