

# Treatise of Human Nature

## Book I: The Understanding

David Hume

Copyright ©2010–2015 All rights reserved. Jonathan Bennett

[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis . . . . indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported on, between [brackets], in normal-sized type.

First launched: July 2004

Last amended: April 2007

# Contents

Part i: Ideas, their origin, composition, connection, abstraction, etc. . . . .	1
1: The origin of our ideas . . . . .	1
2: Division of the subject . . . . .	4
3: Memory and imagination . . . . .	5
4: Association of ideas . . . . .	6
5: Relations . . . . .	8
6: Modes and substances . . . . .	9
7: Abstract ideas . . . . .	10
Part ii: The ideas of space and time . . . . .	16
1: The infinite divisibility of our ideas of space and time . . . . .	16
2: The infinite divisibility of space and time . . . . .	17
3: The other qualities of our ideas of space and time . . . . .	20
4: Objections answered . . . . .	23
5: The same subject continued . . . . .	31
6: The ideas of existence and of external existence . . . . .	38
Part iii: Knowledge and probability . . . . .	40
1: Knowledge . . . . .	40
2: Probability, and the idea of cause and effect . . . . .	42
3: Why a cause is necessary . . . . .	45
4: The component parts of our reasonings about cause and effect . . . . .	47
5: The impressions of the senses and memory . . . . .	48
6: The inference from the impression to the idea . . . . .	50
7: The nature of the idea or belief . . . . .	54
8: The causes of belief . . . . .	57

---

9: The effects of other relations and other habits . . . . .	62
10: Influence of belief . . . . .	67
11: The probability of chances . . . . .	67
12: The probability of causes . . . . .	71
13: Unphilosophical probability . . . . .	75
14: The idea of necessary connection . . . . .	79
15: Rules by which to judge of causes and effects . . . . .	89
16: The reason of animals . . . . .	91
Part iv: The sceptical and other systems of philosophy . . . . .	93
1: Scepticism with regard to reason . . . . .	93
2: Scepticism with regard to the senses . . . . .	97
3: The ancient philosophy . . . . .	115
4: The modern philosophy . . . . .	118
5: The immateriality of the soul . . . . .	122
6: Personal identity . . . . .	132
7: Conclusion of this book . . . . .	141

## Part i: Ideas, their origin, composition, connection, abstraction, etc.

### 1: The origin of our ideas

All the perceptions of the human mind fall into two distinct kinds, which I shall call 'impressions' and 'ideas'. These differ in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind and make their way into our thought or consciousness. The perceptions that enter with most force and violence we may name 'impressions'; and under this name I bring all our sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul [= 'mind'; no religious implications]. By 'ideas' I mean the faint images of the others in thinking and reasoning: for example, all the perceptions aroused by your reading this book—apart from perceptions arising from sight and touch, and apart from the immediate pleasure or uneasiness your reading may cause in you. I don't think I need to say much to explain this distinction: everyone will readily perceive for himself the difference between feeling (·impressions·) and thinking (·ideas·). The usual degrees of intensity of these are easily distinguished, though there may be particular instances where they come close to one another. Thus, in sleep, in a fever, in madness, or in any very violent emotions of soul, our ideas may become like our impressions; as on the other hand it sometimes happens that our impressions are so faint and low that we can't distinguish them from our ideas. But although ideas and impressions are fairly similar in a few cases, they are in general so very different that no-one can hesitate to classify them as different and to give to each a

special name to mark the difference.<sup>1</sup> [In this work, 'name' is often used to cover not only proper names but also general terms such as 'idea'.]

Another division of our perceptions should be noted; this one cuts across the line between impressions and ideas. It is the division into *simple* and *complex*. Simple perceptions—that is, simple impressions and ideas—are ones that don't allow any distinction or separation among their parts. Complex perceptions, on the contrary, can be distinguished into parts. Though a particular colour, taste, and smell, are qualities all united together in this apple, it's easy to perceive that they aren't the same as one another and can least be distinguished from each other—and so one's total perception of the apple is *complex*.

Having through these divisions ordered and arranged our subject-matter (·perceptions·), we can now set ourselves to consider more accurately their qualities and relations. The first fact that springs to my attention is that our impressions greatly *resemble* our ideas in every respect except their degree of force and liveliness. Perceptions of one kind seem to be, in a way, reflections of perceptions of the other kind; so that all the perceptions of the mind do double duty, appearing both as impressions and as ideas. When I shut my eyes and think of my study, the ideas I form are exact representations of the impressions I felt when I was in my study; every detail in one is to be found in the other. And I

<sup>1</sup>I hope you will allow me to use the words 'impression' and 'idea' in senses different from their usual ones. Perhaps, indeed, I am restoring 'idea' to its original sense, from which Mr Locke has perverted it by making it stand for all our perceptions. By the term 'impression' I don't mean anything about *how* our lively perceptions are produced in the soul; I merely label the perceptions themselves; and for this I don't know any particular name, in English or any other language.

find the same resemblance and representation when I survey my other perceptions: ideas and impressions seem always to correspond to each other. This remarkable fact holds my attention for a moment.

Surveying the field more accurately, I find I have been swept along by how things first appeared to me, and that I must—with help from the simple/complex distinction—limit this general thesis that all our ideas and impressions are resembling. I observe that •many of our complex ideas never had impressions that corresponded to them: I can imagine a city such as the New Jerusalem, with golden pavements and ruby walls, though I never saw such a thing. And I observe that •many of our complex impressions are never exactly copied by ideas: I have seen Paris, but I can't form an idea of that city that perfectly represents all its streets and houses in all their detail.

So I perceive that although there is in general a great resemblance between our •complex impressions and ideas, it is not true across the board that they are exact copies of each other. Now let us consider how the case stands with our •simple perceptions. After the most accurate examination I am capable of, I venture to say that here the rule holds without exception: that *every* simple idea has a simple impression that resembles it, and *every* simple impression has a corresponding idea. The idea of red that we form in the dark differs only in •degree •of intensity•, not in •nature, from the impression •of red• that strikes our eyes in sunshine. You can satisfy yourself that I am right about this by going over as many of your simple impressions and ideas as you like; it's impossible to prove my point by going over all of them! But if anyone should deny this universal resemblance •between simple impressions and simple ideas•, I don't know how to convince him except by asking him to show •a simple impression that *doesn't* have a corresponding

idea, or •a simple idea that has no corresponding impression. If he doesn't answer this challenge—and it's certain that he can't—then his silence and our own observation will suffice to establish our conclusion.

Thus we find that all simple ideas and impressions resemble each other; and as the complex are formed from simple ones we can say generally that these two sorts of perception exactly correspond. Having uncovered this relation, which requires no further examination, I am curious to find some of the other qualities •of impressions and ideas•. Let us consider what brings them into existence: as between impressions and ideas, which are causes and which are effects?

The *full* examination of this question is the subject of this book; so I shall here content myself with establishing one general proposition:

**All our simple ideas, when they first appear, are derived from simple impressions which correspond to them and which they exactly represent.**

In looking for phenomena to support this proposition, I can find only two kinds; but the phenomena of each kind are obvious, numerous, and conclusive.

•As a preliminary to the first kind of phenomenon•, I first go over again in my mind, and make myself certain, of the proposition that I have already asserted, that every simple impression is •attended with a corresponding idea, and every simple idea is •attended with a corresponding impression. From this •constant conjunction of resembling perceptions I immediately conclude that there is a great *connection* between our corresponding impressions and ideas, and that the existence of the one has a considerable *influence* on the existence of the other. Such a constant conjunction in such an infinite number of instances can't arise from chance, but clearly proves *a dependence of the impressions on the ideas*

or of the ideas on the impressions. Wanting to know which way the dependence runs, I consider the order in which these simple impressions and ideas first appear; and I find by constant experience that the simple impressions always come first—it is never the other way around. To give a child an idea of scarlet or orange, of sweet or bitter, I present objects that are that colour or taste—that is, I give him those impressions. I don't do anything as absurd as trying to give the child the impression by arousing in him the idea! When our ideas occur they don't produce the corresponding impressions; we don't see any colour or feel any sensation merely by *thinking* of them. On the other hand we find that every impression—whether of mind or body—is followed by an idea that resembles it in every way except its degree of force and liveliness. The constant conjunction of our resembling perceptions is a convincing proof that the one are the causes of the other; and the fact that the impression always comes first is an equal proof that impressions are the causes of our ideas, not vice versa.

This is confirmed by another plain and convincing phenomenon, namely: whenever someone happens to lack the faculty that gives rise to impressions of some kind—e.g. when someone is born blind or deaf—he lacks not only impressions of that kind but also the corresponding ideas; so that his mind never shows the least traces of either of them. This holds not only where the relevant organs of sensation are entirely destroyed, but also when they haven't yet been put into action to produce a particular impression; we can't form an accurate idea of the taste of a pineapple without having actually tasted it.

But there is one phenomenon that goes the other way, and may prove that it is not absolutely impossible for ideas to occur in advance of their corresponding impressions. I think you'll agree that the various ideas of colours that enter by the

eyes are really different from each other, though there are resemblances amongst them; similarly for ideas of sounds that are conveyed by the sense of hearing. If this is true of different colours, it must equally hold for the different shades of the same colour that each of them produces a distinct idea that is independent of the others. (If not, then it is possible by the continual gradation of shades to run a colour imperceptibly into what is most remote from it. We can create a sequence of colours, each barely perceptibly different from its neighbours, with some colour at the start of the sequence and a totally different one at the end. If you won't allow any of the intervening pairs of neighbours to be different, you can't without absurdity say that the colours at the ends of the sequence are different—which they patently are.) Now take the case of someone who has had the use of his eyesight for thirty years, and has become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds except for one particular shade of blue, which he happens never to have encountered. Let all the different shades of blue except that single one be placed before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest. Obviously, he will perceive a blank in the sequence where that shade is missing, and will be aware that the qualitative gap between neighbours is greater at that place than anywhere else in the sequence. Now I ask:

Can he fill this gap from his own imagination, raising up in his mind the idea of that particular shade, even though an impression of it had never been conveyed to him by his senses?

I think most people will agree that he can; and this may serve as a proof that simple ideas are not *always* derived from corresponding impressions. But this instance is so particular and singular [those are Hume's adjectives] that it is hardly worth noticing, and isn't enough on its own to require us to alter our general maxim.

But I ought to mention that the principle that *impressions come before ideas* is subject not only to the exception (about the missing shade of blue) that I have just sketched but also to another limitation, namely: just as our ideas are images [= 'copies'] of our impressions, so we can form secondary ideas that are images of primary ones; and my own theory allows for this. This is not strictly speaking an *exception to* the rule that impressions come first, but rather an *explanation of* it. Ideas produce the images of themselves in new secondary ideas; but as the first or primary ideas are derived from impressions, it still remains true that all our simple ideas come from their corresponding impressions—either immediately or as secondary ideas through the mediation of primary ideas.

This, then, is the first principle I establish in the science of human nature. Don't despise it because it looks simple. It is a remarkable fact that the present question about which

comes first, impressions or ideas, is the very one that has created so much noise when expressed as the question of whether there are any innate ideas, or whether all ideas are derived from sensation and reflection. Notice that when philosophers want to show the ideas of extension and colour not to be innate, all they do is to show that those ideas are conveyed by our senses. To show that the ideas of passion and desire are not innate they observe that we have a prior experience of these emotions in ourselves. Now, if we carefully examine these arguments we shall find that they prove only that ideas are preceded by other more lively perceptions, from which they are derived and which they represent. I hope this clear statement of the question will remove all disputes about it, and will render this principle of more use in our reasonings than it seems to have been up to now.

## 2: Division of the subject

Since it appears that our simple impressions come before their corresponding ideas, and that the exceptions to this are very rare, it seems that the methodical procedure would be to examine our impressions before turning to our ideas. Impressions can be divided into two kinds, those of *sensation* and those of *reflection*. Impressions of sensation arise in the soul itself, from unknown causes. Impressions of reflection are largely derived from our ideas, in the following way. An impression first strikes on the senses and makes us perceive heat or cold, thirst or hunger, pleasure or pain, of some kind or other. Of this impression the mind makes a copy which

remains after the impression ceases; and we call this copy an 'idea'. When this idea of pleasure or pain recurs in the soul, it produces new impressions of desire and aversion, hope and fear, which may properly be called 'impressions of reflection' because they are derived from reflection. These impressions are in turn copied by the memory and imagination and become sources of ideas, which in their turn may give rise to yet other impressions and ideas. Thus the impressions of reflection come before their corresponding ideas but come after impressions of sensation and are derived from them. The study of our sensations belongs more to anatomists

and natural philosophers than to moral philosophers [= 'belongs more to anatomists and natural scientists than to philosophers and scientists interested in the human condition']; so I shan't go into it here. And as the impressions of reflection—that is, the passions, desires, and emotions—that mainly deserve our attention arise mostly from ideas, we must reverse the method that seems most natural at first sight: in explaining the nature and principles of the human mind, we must deal in detail with ideas before we proceed to impressions. That

is why I have chosen to begin with ideas.

**[Important note:** Most of Hume's uses of 'principle' in *Treatise I*, including the one we have just met, give it a meaning that it often had in his day, namely that of 'source', 'cause', 'drive', 'mechanism' or the like. From now on, every occurrence of the word in that sense will be written as 'principle<sub>c</sub>', suggesting 'principle = cause'. A 'principle' without the subscript is a proposition, usually a premise but sometimes a conclusion.]

### 3: Memory and imagination

We find by experience that when an impression has been present to the mind, it re-appears there later as an idea; and it can do this in either of two ways: •when in its new appearance it retains a good deal of its first liveliness and is intermediate between an impression and an idea; or •when it entirely loses that liveliness and is a perfect idea. The faculty by which we repeat our impressions in the first manner is called the 'memory', and the other the 'imagination'. You can see at a glance that the ideas of the memory are much livelier and stronger than those of the imagination, and that the memory paints its objects in sharper colours than the imagination uses. When we remember a past event, the idea of it flows in on the mind in a forcible manner; whereas in the imagination the perception is faint and languid, and the mind can't easily keep it steady and uniform for any considerable time. Here, then, is a noticeable difference between one species of ideas and another. But of this more fully hereafter, in I.iii.5.

Another, equally obvious, difference between these two kinds of ideas is this: though neither the ideas of the memory nor those of imagination—neither the lively ideas nor the faint ones—can appear in the mind unless their corresponding impressions have gone before to prepare the way for them, the imagination isn't bound to keep the same order and form as the original impressions had, whereas the memory is in a way tied down in that respect, without any power of variation.

It is evident that the memory preserves the form in which its objects were originally presented, and that when we depart from that form in recollecting something, this comes from some defect or imperfection in that faculty. An historian may find it more convenient to relate one event before another which in fact occurred before it, but then, if he is careful, he comments on this re-ordering, and thereby puts the relevant ideas back in their right order. Similarly with our recollection of places and persons with which we



were formerly acquainted: the chief exercise of the memory is not to preserve the simple ideas, but to preserve their order and ·temporal· position. In short, this principle is supported by so many common and everyday phenomena that I needn't trouble to insist on it any further.

Equally evident is the second principle, of the imagination's liberty to transpose and change its ideas. The fables we meet with in poems and romances put this quite beyond doubt. Nature there is totally confounded, with

stories full of winged horses, fiery dragons, and monstrous giants. This liberty of the fancy [= 'imagination'] won't appear strange when we consider that all our ideas are copied from our impressions, and that no two impressions are perfectly inseparable; ·so that there are no constraints on how freely ideas may be assembled and re-arranged·. Not to mention that this is an evident consequence of the division of ideas into simple and complex. Wherever the imagination perceives a difference among ideas it can easily produce a separation.

#### 4: Association of ideas

The imagination, then, can separate ideas and then re-unite them in whatever form it pleases; so its operations would be perfectly inexplicable—a meaningless jumble of random events—if it weren't guided by some universal principles<sub>c</sub> that give some uniformity to its doings at different times. If ideas were entirely loose and unconnected, they would be joined ·in the imagination· purely by *chance*; and in that case it couldn't happen—as in fact it often does—that the same simple ideas regularly came together into complex ones. For that there needs to be some ·bond of union among them, some ·associating quality by which one idea naturally introduces another. This ·uniting principle<sub>c</sub> among ideas is not an unbreakable connection, for *that* has been already excluded from the imagination; nor should we conclude that the mind cannot join two ideas without this uniting principle<sub>c</sub>, for nothing is more free than the imagination, ·which can join any two ideas it pleases·. We should regard the uniting principle<sub>c</sub> only as ·a gentle force that ·usually

dominates, ·not as an ·irresistibly strong one that ·always dominates·. Among the things it explains is the fact that languages so nearly correspond to one another: it is because Nature has (in a way) pointed out to everyone the simple ideas that are most suitable for being united into a complex one.

The relations that give rise to this association ·of ideas·, in this way carrying the mind from one idea to another, are these three: ·resemblance, ·contiguity [= 'nextness'] in time or place, and ·cause and effect. [Hume calls the three relations 'qualities', but only in this paragraph.] I don't think I have much need to *show* that these ·three· relations produce an association between ideas such that when one appears it is naturally followed by another. It is plainly the case that in the course of our thinking and in the constant turn-over of our ideas our imagination runs easily from one idea to any other that ·resembles it, and that this quality alone is for the imagination a sufficient bond and association. It is likewise

evident that as the *senses* have to move from object to object in a regular manner, taking them as they lie •contiguous to each other, so the imagination also must become accustomed to following the same pattern in its *thinking*, and run along the parts of space and time in conceiving its objects. The •relation of cause and effect will be thoroughly examined later, so I shan't say much now about its role in creating associations of ideas. I merely say that there is no relation that produces a stronger connection in the fancy, and makes one idea more readily recall another, than the relation of cause and effect between their objects.

To understand the full extent of these •three• relations, we must grasp that two objects are connected together in the imagination not only when •one is *immediately* related to the other by resemblance or contiguity or cause-effect, but also when •a third object comes between them and is related in one of the ways to them both. This can be carried on to a great length, though each lengthening of the chain considerably weakens •the association of ideas that comes from• the relation. Fourth-cousins are connected by causation (if I may so express myself), but not as closely as brothers are, let alone children and their parents. In general all the blood-relationships depend on cause and effect, and are regarded as close or distant according to how many connecting causes are interposed between the persons.

Of the three relations above mentioned, causation is the most extensive. Two objects can be considered as related by it not only when one is the cause of •the existence of the other but also when one is the cause of •some action or motion of the other. . . . This line of thought goes further: two objects are connected by the cause- effect relation not only when one •*does* produce a motion or action in the other but also when it •*has the power to* produce it. This, we can see, is the source of all the relations of •self-interest and

duty by which men influence each other in society, leading to some being governors and others subordinates. A *master* is someone whose situation gives him—whether by force or by prior agreement—a power of directing some of the actions of someone else whom we call *servant*. A *judge* is one who can by his opinion settle questions of ownership that are disputed between members of the society. When someone has a power, all that is needed to turn it into action is the exercise of his will; and his exercising it is in every case regarded as possible, and in many cases as probable—especially in ones where there is *authority*, where the subject's obedience will bring pleasure and advantage to the master.

These, then, are the principles<sub>c</sub> of union or cohesion among our simple ideas, providing in our imagination a substitute for the tighter links that ideas have in our memory. This •association of ideas• is a kind of *attraction*, which in the mental world will be found to have effects as extraordinary as •those of attraction or gravity• in the physical world, and to show itself in as many and as various forms. Its effects are everywhere conspicuous; but its causes are mostly unknown, and must be assigned to basic qualities of human nature that I don't claim to explain. What a true philosopher needs most is to restrain the immoderate desire to search into causes; and, having established a doctrine on the basis of a sufficient number of experiments, to rest content with that when he sees that a further enquiry •into *its* causes• would lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations. In that case he would spend his time and energy better in examining the •effects of his principle than in examining its •causes.

Among the effects of this union or association of ideas, none are more remarkable than the *complex ideas* that are the common subjects of our thoughts and reasoning, and that generally arise from some principle<sub>c</sub> of union among our simple ideas. These complex ideas can be divided

into •relations, •modes, and •substances. I shall briefly examine these in order; and shall ·in section 7· add some considerations about our general and particular ideas. That

will bring me to the end of ·Part i and of· the present subject, which can be considered as the elements of this philosophy.

## 5: Relations

The word ‘relation’ is commonly used in two senses considerably different from each other: either for a •quality by which two ideas are connected in the imagination so that one naturally introduces the other, in the way I have explained; or for a •particular basis on which we may see fit to compare two ideas which we *choose* to bring together in the fancy (·without either of them naturally leading to the other·). [In Hume’s time, ‘comparing’ two things could be simply *bringing them together in a single thought*, not necessarily a thought about their being alike. (We still have that usage in the expression ‘Let’s get together and compare notes’.) That broader, weaker sense of ‘compare’ seems clearly to be sometimes at work in the present section, but in the paragraph labelled ‘1.’ our more usual narrower sense seems to be assumed.] What is called a ‘relation’ in common speech is always the former; only in philosophy do we extend the word to cover any particular basis of comparison when there is no connecting principle<sub>c</sub>. For example, *distance* will be classified by philosophers as a true relation, because we acquire an idea of it by comparing objects; but in everyday speech we say things like ‘Nothing can be more distant than the furthest star and the earth; no two things can have less relation’, as if *distance* and *relation* were incompatible. [For Hume, relations don’t divide into •philosophical and •natural; and when he writes as though they do, he is using ‘philosophical’ as short-hand

for ‘*only philosophical*’ or ‘*philosophical and not natural*’.] It may be thought an endless task to enumerate all the qualities that make objects admit of comparison, and by which the ideas of philosophical relation are produced. But if we look carefully we shall find that they can easily be put into seven kinds, which can be considered as the sources of all *philosophical relation* ·and thus of all *relation*·.

1. The first is •resemblance. This is a relation without which no philosophical relation can exist, for no objects can be compared unless they have some degree of resemblance. But though resemblance is necessary for all philosophical relation, it doesn’t follow that it always produces a connection or association of ideas. When a quality becomes very general, and is common to a great many individuals, it doesn’t lead the mind directly to any one of them, because there is too great a choice for the imagination to fix on any single object.

2. •Identity can be counted as a second kind of relation. This relation I here consider as applied in its strictest sense to constant and unchanging objects, without examining the nature and foundation of personal identity, which will be discussed later (·in I.iv.6·). Identity is the most universal of all relations, because it is common to every thing that stays in existence for any period of time.

3. The next most universal and comprehensive relations,

after identity, are those of •space and time, which are the sources of an infinite number of comparisons, such as distant, contiguous, above, below, before, after, etc.

4. All objects that admit of •quantity or number can be compared in that respect, which is another very fertile source of relation.

5. When two objects have a quality in common, the •degrees to which they have it form a fifth species of relation. Thus, of two objects that both have weight, one may be lighter or heavier than the other. Two colours of the same kind may be of different shades, and in that respect admit of comparison.

6. The relation of •contrariety might at first be regarded as an exception to the rule that no relation of any kind can hold between two things without some degree of resemblance between them. But bear in mind that no two ideas are in themselves •flatly and absolutely• contrary except those

of *existence* and *non-existence*; and it is clear that •even• these—•contrary though they are—are resembling, because each of them conveys an idea of the object, though the latter *excludes* the object from times and places at which it is supposed not to exist.

7. All other objects—such as fire and water, heat and cold—are found to be contrary only by experience, and from the contrariety of their causes or effects; and this relation of •cause and effect is a seventh philosophical relation, as well as a natural one. The resemblance implied in this relation will be explained later.

You might naturally have expected me to include *difference* among the relations; but I regard difference as a *negation* of relation rather than as anything real or positive. Difference is of two kinds, as opposed either to identity or resemblance. The first is called difference of number, the other difference of kind.

## 6: Modes and substances

I have a question for those philosophers who base so much of their reasoning on the distinction between substance and accident [= 'quality'], and who imagine that we have clear ideas of each. Is the idea of substance—I ask—derived from impressions of sensation or of reflection? If •the former, that is, if• it is conveyed to us by our senses, I ask: Which of our senses, and how? If it is perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste; and so on with the other senses. But I don't think anyone will say that substance is a colour, a sound, or a taste! So

the idea of substance must be derived from an impression of reflection, if it really exists. But the impressions of reflection come down to our passions and emotions, and none of those can possibly represent a substance. So we have *no* idea of substance other than the idea of a collection of particular qualities, and such collections are all we can meaningfully refer to when we talk or think about 'substance'.

The idea of a •substance, as well as that of a •mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas that are united by the imagination and assigned a particular name by which we

can recall that collection to ourselves or to others. But the difference between these two sorts of ideas comes from the following facts about the ideas of •substances. The particular qualities that form a substance are commonly referred to an unknown and fictional *something* in which they are supposed to inhere; or, when this fiction doesn't occur, the qualities in the collection are at least supposed to be closely and inseparably connected by the relations of contiguity and causation. The effect of this is that when we discover some new simple quality to have the same connection with the rest as they have with one another, we immediately include it among them, even though it didn't enter into our first conception of the substance. Thus our idea of *gold* may at first be a yellow colour, weight, malleableness, and fusibility; but when we learn that it is soluble in aqua regia we join that to the other qualities and suppose it to belong to the substance as much as if its idea had been part of

the compound one from the outset. The uniting force of the qualities is regarded as the chief part of the complex idea, so it provides a way into the complex idea for any quality that turns up later—letting that quality in along with the ones that first presented themselves.

To see that this can't happen with •modes, consider their nature. The simple ideas out of which modes are formed either represent

qualities that are not united by contiguity and causation, but are scattered through different subjects;

or, if they *are* all united together,

the uniting principle<sub>c</sub> is not regarded as the foundation of the complex idea.

The idea of a *dance* is an instance of the first kind of mode; the idea of *beauty* an example of the second. It is obvious why complex ideas of *this* kind can't admit any new idea without changing the name that has been given to the mode.

## 7: Abstract ideas

An important question has been raised about abstract or general ideas, namely: Are they general or particular in the mind's conception of them? A great philosopher—Dr Berkeley—has challenged the usual opinion about this, and has asserted that a general idea is nothing but a particular idea attached to a certain word that gives it a wider application and makes it recall (when needed) other individuals that are similar to it. As I regard this as one of the greatest and most valuable scholarly discoveries that has been made in recent years, I shall try here to confirm it by some arguments

that I hope will put it beyond all doubt and controversy.

It is evident that in forming most (if not all) of our general ideas we abstract from every particular degree of quantity and quality, and that objects aren't prevented from belonging to the same species by small differences in size, duration, or other properties. It might be thought that we are here confronted by a plain dilemma, which will let us settle the nature of those 'abstract ideas' that philosophers have speculated about so much. Here is how the argument runs:

The abstract idea of *man* represents men of all sizes

and all qualities, and there are only two ways it might do that: by •representing *all* possible sizes and all possible qualities at once, or by •representing *no* particular sizes or qualities at all. The former of these is absurd, because it implies an infinite capacity in the mind. So we must opt for the latter, and suppose that our abstract ideas represent no particular degree of quantity or quality.

I shall try to show that this inference is erroneous, by arguing •that it is utterly impossible to conceive any quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of its degrees; and secondly •that though the capacity of the mind is not infinite we *can* form—all at once—a notion of all possible degrees of quantity and quality. However imperfect our way of doing this may be, it may at least •be good enough to• serve all the purposes of thought and conversation. (•My first point challenges the argument’s conclusion; my second undercuts one of its premises•.)

To begin with the first proposition, that the mind can’t form any notion of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of degrees of each, we can prove this by the following three arguments. **Firstly**, I have observed that

whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination.

Now we should bring in the converse propositions:

whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are also different.

For how could we separate what is not distinguishable, or distinguish what is not different? With this in hand, let us examine whether all the circumstances that we abstract *out of* a general idea are distinguishable and different from those that we retain as essential parts of the idea. It is clear

straight off that •the precise length of a line is not different or distinguishable from •the line itself; •and more generally that• the precise degree of any quality is not different or distinguishable from the quality. Since these don’t admit of distinction and difference, they don’t admit of separation either (•following the second of the propositions displayed above•). So they are •inseparably• conjoined with each other in the conception: our general idea of a line, notwithstanding all our abstractions and refinements, has in its appearance in the mind a precise degree of quantity and quality. Even if it is made to represent other lines that have different degrees of both, •it doesn’t do this by *not having* any degree of either•.

**Secondly**, it is admitted that no object can appear to the senses— i.e. that no impression can become present to the mind—without being determinate in its degrees both of quantity and quality. Impressions are sometimes confused, but only because they are faint or unsteady, not because the mind can receive any impression that in itself has no particular degree nor proportion! Such an impression would be a contradiction in terms, and even implies the flattest of all contradictions, namely that it is possible for something both to be and not to be.

Now, since all ideas are •derived from impressions and are nothing but •copies and •representations of them, whatever is true of the one must be admitted to hold also for the other. Impressions and ideas differ only in their strength and liveliness. What I have said •about impressions’ having to be determinate in quantity and quality• wasn’t based on their having a certain degree of liveliness, so it must hold equally for perceptions that are less lively. So: an idea is a weaker impression; and, as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the same must hold for its copy or representative.

**Thirdly**, it is a principle generally accepted in philosophy that every thing in Nature is individual, and that it is utterly absurd to suppose (for instance) a really existent triangle that has no precise proportion of sides and angles. If this is absurd *in fact and reality*, therefore, it must also be absurd *in idea*, since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. But *forming the idea of an object* and *forming an idea* is the same thing; describing the idea as ‘of an object’ merely relates it to something outside it and says nothing about its own character. Now, as it is impossible to

form an idea *of an object that has* quantity and quality but no precise degree of either,

it follows that it is equally impossible to

form an idea that *itself has* quantity and quality but no precise degree of either.

So abstract ideas are •in themselves individual, even when they become •general in their representation. The image in the mind is only that of a particular object, though the application of it in our reasoning may be the same as if it were universal. •Now I turn to the question of *how* we apply such ideas in our reasoning•.

This application of ideas beyond their nature—that is, their being *used* universally although in their own nature they are particular—comes from our bundling together all their possible degrees of quantity and quality, in a rough and ready way that serves for everyday purposes. This is

the second proposition I proposed to explain •in my initial criticism of the ‘dilemma’ argument•. When we have found a resemblance among a number of objects that we often encounter, we apply a single name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them.<sup>2</sup>

After we have become accustomed to using the word in that way, the hearing of it revives •in our mind• the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it in all its particular detail. But the same word is supposed to have been frequently applied to other individuals that are different in many respects from the idea that is immediately present to the mind, and the word can’t revive the idea of all these individuals; so all it does is to touch the soul (if I may put it like that) and revive the custom that we have acquired by surveying them. Those individuals are present to the mind not •actually but •only potentially. We don’t portray them all distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves ready to survey any of them when we are so prompted by a present plan or by necessity. The word raises up an •individual idea along with a certain •custom, and that custom produces any other individual idea that comes to be appropriate. But as the production of *all* the ideas to which the name may be applied is in most cases impossible, we shorten the work by a more partial consideration, and we find few inconveniences arising in our reasoning from that abridgment.

<sup>2</sup>It is obvious that different ideas—even simple ones—can have a similarity or resemblance to each other; and the respect in which they are alike need not be distinct or separable from respects in which they differ. *Blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but they are more alike than are *blue* and *scarlet*; though their perfect simplicity makes it impossible to separate or distinguish their respect of similarity. The same holds for particular sounds, tastes, and smells. These can be alike in countless ways, taking them as wholes, without having any •separable• feature in common. And we can be sure of this general point by considering the very abstract phrase ‘simple idea’. This covers all simple ideas, and these •resemble each other in that they are all *simple*. Yet precisely because they *are* simple, and thus have no complexity or compoundedness about them, this •respect in which they are all alike is not distinguishable or separable from the rest. It is the same case with the different degrees of a quality: they are all alike, yet the quality in any individual is not distinct from the degree—•we can’t, even in thought, separate a thing’s bright-blueness into two components of which one is mere blueness•.

For this is one of the most extraordinary aspects of this business, that after we have done some reasoning with an individual idea in our mind, the associated custom—revived by the general or abstract word that we use to name the original idea—readily brings to mind any other individual to which the word also applies, if by chance we have gone wrong in our reasoning. For example, if we used the word ‘triangle’ and formed the idea of a particular *equilateral* one to correspond to it, and if we went on to assert that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other, all the individual triangles that we have overlooked—the ones that are not equilateral—would immediately crowd in on us and make us see the falsehood of what we had just said, even though it was true in relation to the idea we first formed. If the mind doesn’t always suggest these ideas when it would be appropriate to do so, that comes from some imperfection in its faculties—an imperfection that is often the source of false reasoning and sophistry. But this is principally the case with ideas that are abstruse and compounded. On other occasions the custom is more entire [= ‘holds together more firmly’], and we don’t often run into such errors.

Indeed, so entire is the custom that the very same idea may be attached to several different words and used in different reasonings, with no danger of mistake. Thus the idea of *an equilateral triangle of an inch perpendicular* may serve us when we are talking of a

‘figure’,  
‘rectilinear figure’,  
‘regular figure’,  
‘triangle’, or  
‘equilateral triangle’.

In this case all these terms are associated with the same idea; but as the terms are standardly applied to smaller or larger ranges of particulars, each arouses its special habit

and no confusion need arise. . . . Before those habits have become entirely perfect, the mind may sometimes not be content with forming the idea of only one individual, and may instead run over several ideas so as to make itself grasp its own meaning and the range of the collection that it intends to express by the general term. Wanting to fix the meaning of the word ‘shape’, we may revolve in our mind the ideas of circles, squares, parallelograms, triangles of different sizes and proportions, not resting on one image or idea. Still, it is certain that when we use any general term we form the idea of *individuals*, that we can seldom if ever bring all these individuals to mind, and that the ones we don’t bring to mind are represented only by means of the *habit* by which we recall them when there is a need to. This then is the nature of our abstract ideas and general terms; and this is how I deal with the foregoing paradox, that some ideas are particular in their nature but general in their representation. *A particular idea becomes general by being attached to a general term*; i.e. to a term that is related by a customary conjunction to many other particular ideas which it readily recalls in the imagination.

If there remains any difficulty in this subject, it must concern the *custom* that so readily recalls every particular idea for which we may have need, and is triggered by any word or sound to which we commonly attach it. The most proper method of explaining this act of the mind, I think, is by producing other instances that are analogous to it, and other forces that help it to operate. It is impossible to explain the *ultimate* causes of our mental actions; it’s enough to give a satisfactory account of them from experience and analogy.

First, then, I observe that when we mention any great number, such as a thousand, the mind has generally no adequate idea of it but only a power of producing such an idea through its adequate idea of the decimals under which



the number is comprehended. This imperfection in our ideas, however, never affects our reasonings; so this seems to be an instance parallel to the one about universal ideas that I have been discussing.

Secondly, we have several instances of habits that can be revived by a single word; as when a person who has learned by rote a speech or poem, and then can't remember it, will call the whole thing to mind once he is given the single word or phrase with which it begins.

Thirdly, if you examine what goes on in your mind in reasoning, I think will agree with me that we don't attach distinct and complete ideas to every term we use: in talking of 'government', 'church', 'negotiation', 'conquest', we seldom spread out in our minds *all* the simple ideas of which these complex ones are composed. Despite this imperfection, however, we can avoid talking nonsense on these subjects and can perceive any conflicts among the ideas as well as if we had them fully in our minds. Thus, if instead of saying that *in war the weaker always have recourse to negotiation* we should say that they always have recourse to *conquest*, the custom we have acquired of attributing certain relations to ideas still follows the words and makes us immediately perceive the absurdity of that proposition. This is like the way in which one particular idea can serve us in reasoning concerning other ideas, however much they differ from it in some respects.

Fourthly, when the individuals are collected together and put under a general term on the basis of their resemblance to one another, this relation must •make it easier for them to enter the imagination, and •make them more likely to be suggested when there is a need for them. And, indeed, if we consider the usual way our thoughts move in private thought and in conversation, we shall find good reason to be convinced of this. The imagination has an *admirable*

readiness to suggest its ideas and to present them at the very instant when they are necessary or useful. In collecting the ideas that belong to a subject, the fancy runs from one end of the universe to the other: one might think that we could see the whole intellectual world of ideas all at once, and that all we did was to *pick out* the ideas that best suited our purpose. But it may be that really the only ideas that we have ·at such a moment· are the ·seemingly 'picked out' ones·—the very ideas that are thus collected by a kind of magical faculty in the soul. This faculty is always most perfect in the greatest geniuses—and is properly what we call 'genius'—but it can't be explained by the utmost efforts of human understanding.

Perhaps these four reflections will help to remove the obstacles to accepting my hypothesis about abstract ideas, contrary as it is to what has previously prevailed in philosophy. But to tell the truth, my chief source of confidence lies in what I have already proved about the impossibility of general ideas according to the usual account of them. ·Because of that proof·, we have to look for *some* other account of general ideas, and clearly mine is the only candidate. If ideas are •particular in their nature and •finite in their number, the only way they can become•general in their representation and •contain infinitely many other ideas under them is through *custom*.

Before I leave this subject, I shall employ the same principles to explain that 'distinction of reason' that is so much talked of, and so little understood, in the schools [= (roughly) 'philosophy departments dominated by Aristotelian ideas']. Examples of this are the distinctions •between *shape* and *the body that has the shape*, and •between *motion* and *the body that moves*. It is hard to make sense of this 'distinction' in light of the principle— explained above—that all ideas that are different are separable. For *it* implies that if the

shape is different from the body ·that has it·, their ideas must be separable as well as distinguishable, ·which plainly they are not·. . . . What then is meant by a ‘distinction of reason’, since it implies neither a difference nor separation? To remove this difficulty, we must rely on the account I have given of abstract ideas. It is certain that nobody would ever have dreamed of distinguishing a shape from the shaped body—from which it is in reality not distinguishable or different or separable—if it hadn’t been noticed that even this simple shaped body (·which is ‘simple’ in the sense that it can’t be divided into two elements, the shape and the body·) has many different resemblances and relations ·to other things·. For example, when we see a globe of white marble, we receive only the impression of a white colour laid out in a certain shape, and we can’t separate and distinguish the colour from the shape. But when we later see a globe of black marble and a cube of white, and compare them with our former object, we find *two separate resemblances* in something that formerly seemed, and really was, quite

incapable of being separated out into two components. After a little more practice of this kind, we begin to distinguish the shape from the colour by a *distinction of reason*; that is, we consider the shape and colour together, since they are in effect the same and undistinguishable; but still we view them in different aspects, according to the resemblances they can enter into. Wanting to consider only the shape of the globe of white marble, we actually form an idea of both the shape and the colour, but we have our eye on its resemblance to the globe of black marble; and when we want to consider its colour only, we look to its resemblance to the cube of white marble. In this way we accompany our ideas with a kind of reflection of which custom makes us largely unaware. Someone who asks us to consider the shape of a globe of white marble without thinking of its colour is asking for an impossibility; but what he *means* to ask is that we consider the colour and shape together, but still keep our eye on the resemblance to the globe of black marble or to any other globe of whatever colour or substance.