

CHAPTER - VThe Treatise and the Enquiry compared

Kemp Smith thinks that he did. He quotes in evidence the Enquiry, paras, 47-9. Thus Hume writes in para 49. 'I say, then that belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object, than what the imagination alone is ever able to attain ... . But as it is impossible that this faculty of imagination can ever, of itself, reach belief ... . Here, it might seem, the view that imagination can be a faculty of belief has been, as Kemp Smith says, 'explicitly disavowed'. He sums up his discussion of Hume's theory of imagination as follows : 'Thus we seem justified in concluding that Hume's ascription of primacy to the imagination has no greater importance in the philosophy of the Treatise than that of being merely a corollary to his early doctrine of belief. On modifying that doctrine in the Appendix to the Treatise and in the Enquiry concerning Human Understanding, the reasons which had led him to extend the functions of the imagination beyond those ordinarily assigned to it ceased to hold.' But now, let us look at the Enquiry passage quoted above. Does it amount to a disavowal ? It is important to note the phrases 'the imagination alone' and 'the imagination can never, of itself' (italics not in text). The question we must ask is, Did Hume say anything different in the Treatise ? Did he say that the imagination could by itself reach belief ? I shall try to

show that apart from one careless passage, which he corrected in the Appendix to the Treatise, and which is out of line with his general position, he did not. Let us take, for instance, the passage which Kemp Smith has used as his opening quotation (p.265) and let us look in particular at the two sentences which immediately precede the quotation.

'Experience', writes Hume, 'is a principle, which instructs me in the several conjunctions of objects for the past.

Habit is another principle, which determines me to expect the same for the future; and both of them conspiring to operate upon the imagination, make me form certain ideas in a more intense and lively manner, than others, which are not attended with the same advantages.'

Hume is here clearly saying that the imagination, when operated on by certain principles, assists in the production of belief. He does not say that the imagination 'by itself' can reach belief. The imagination is just one link in the chain. Nor, in the case of capricious belief, is imagination a sufficient cause. There are 'principles' at work here too, even though they are 'changeable, weak and irregular.'

The only place I know of in the Treatise where Hume departs from this position is on p.123 where he says that in the warmth of a poetical enthusiasm, a poet has a counterfeit belief ...' Here we have imagination leading to belief without extraneous aid. And this is what the Enquiry denies. But note 'counterfeit belief, which half-corrects the error. And Hume suitably modified the passage in the Appendix. I think we may concede that the error was a gratuitous slip.

We may add that if Hume does not refer in the Enquiry to imagination as a factor in the production of belief, his account of how belief is formed is nevertheless substantially the same as in the Treatise. Compare Enquiry, para 41, where we are told that association with an object of the senses or the memory gives rise to that 'steadier and stronger conception' which we call belief. This, Hume considers, is a general law, which takes place in all the operations of the mind'. If this passage had occurred in the Treatise he might have worded the last phrase 'all the operations of the imagination'. In any case, the theory of belief advanced is substantially that of the Treatise. What we have is the dropping of a word, not a change of theory.

I submit, then, that neither the Enquiry nor the Appendix to the Treatise disavows in any important particular Hume's views on imagination as expressed in the body of the Treatise. We have imagination in a wide sense as the faculty of perfect ideas, we also have it as a necessary link in the chain of events which ends in belief. But in more acceptable terms, discarding Hume's 'faculties' and 'ideas', what his two senses, as described on p. 265 of the Treatise, come to is this. We can say that imagination is at work when we are building castles in the air. But we can also say that imagination is at work when, for one reason or another and in one context or another, what would otherwise be fancy is converted into belief; feigning turns into assent. In other words it is a fact that whereas we may be able to pass freely from say A to B or A to C, we are coerced to pass from X to Y

rather than from X to Z. We have free imagination, which equals fancy, and we have restricted imagination, which leads to belief.

It must be granted that there appears little to be gained - indeed the reverse - by Hume's distinction, particularly, as we have seen, when we try to square it with the distinction he had made earlier on p. 117. And we may feel duly grateful that only one sense, imagination as fancy, is retained in his Enquiry.

It might at this state be objected, well, if the omission of imagination in the sense of a belief-producer is not to be explained as a change of theory, how do you explain it? I think the answer is to be found in the fact that the Enquiry is a more compressed work than the Treatise. The former is a shorter writing and yet it contains more: its topics are more numerous. The compression is achieved by economy. And this, I think, is the main reason why Hume's second sense of imagination is discarded.

There is a revealing instance of this drive for economy in the Enquiry, paras, 124-5, a passage where the imagination is also concerned. Hume has been considering paradoxes relating to the infinite divisibility of space and time. He had solved these in the Treatise by referring to a tendency of the imagination to go beyond experience. Thus, having noticed various cases of equality - what we might call carpenter's equality, engineer's equality, physicist's equality, we proceed to imagine a perfect - but he considers - fictitious and indeed false equality. This extrapolating tendency of the

imagination he will later express as follows: The imagination, when set into any train of thinking is apt to continue, even when its object fails it, and like a galley put in motion by the oars, carries on its course without any new impulse'. Our galley, we might say, leaves the daylight of experience and is carried on by its acquired momentum into the dark cave of fiction and illusion.

Now in the Enquiry Hume states the infinite-divisibility paradoxes and is almost prepared to leave them there unsolved as just another instance of the failure of reason. But candour wins the day, and in a footnote to para 125 he hints at a solution, the conclusion of which is 'If this be admitted ... it follows that all the ideas of quantity, upon which mathematicians reason, are nothing but particular, and such as are suggested by the senses and imagination, and consequently, cannot be infinitely divisible. It is sufficient to have dropped this hint at present, without prosecuting it any further.' Hume could very well have mentioned the Treatise galley-theory at this point. That he did not do so can hardly have been due to dissatisfaction with the view - it is quite a useful theory which he puts to good account in the Treatise when giving his ingenious explanation of the belief in 'body'. Rather, I suggest, we have here another instance of his pruning-knife at work. It may be added that the Enquiry contains nothing comparable to the Treatise discussion of the belief in 'body'. If it had, Hume would have had reason to mention the galley-theory; and if he had done so in that context he might possibly have done so in the footnote to para 125, so that the

two instances could mutually support each other.

So far we have been mainly concerned with what Hume meant, or tells us he meant, by imagination. We have, on the way, considered how far he modified his use of the term in his Enquiry. Does Hume use 'imagination' in an uncommon sense?

One other point about Hume's usage we should consider. How far do his two main usages in his Treatise compare with the usages we have distinguished in previous chapters? In a footnote already referred to, Hume implies that he has not used the term 'Imagination' in anything but a common sense. Is this in fact the case? There can be no doubt that his first usage - imagination as fancy, the faculty of mental image - is a common usage. What are we to say of his second usage? Here we must consider separately the imagining of the vulgar and the imagining of the philosophers. When I, qua vulgar imagine that there is now a wall behind me I am, according to Hume, believing something that is demonstratively false; I am accepting unperceived perceptions. My imagining can therefore be equated with supposal - false supposal. But consider now the case of the philosophers. When I, qua philosopher, imagine that there is at this moment, a wall behind me I am believing something that can neither be proved nor disproved. This philosophical imagining is not, then, equivalent to our plain supposal, for that supposal does not include belief, nor is it equivalent to our false supposal, because the philosopher's belief may, for all we know, be true. Nor

can we equate this philosophical imagining with either our first or our third usage of imagination: the philosophers are not just day-dreaming and they can hardly be regarded as engaged in a creative, original activity. We must conclude then, and here we are on common ground with Kemp Smith, that Hume was wrong in thinking that his two senses of imagination were both common ones. The first is so, but the second is a hybrid: it is compounded of a common use, the imagining of the vulgar and an uncommon one, the imagining of the philosophers. It is this hybrid use, as we saw, that he does not employ in his Enquiry.

What is distinctive in Hume's treatment of imagination ?

To what extent, we may now ask, have we yet found anything distinctive in Hume's treatment of imagination ? His treatment, we may say broadly, includes a theory of association, of thinking and of belief. Let us look at each of these. The theory of thinking is the view that thoughts are images, i.e. pictures or copies of reality. And here we may consider whether Hume merits the title 'imagist' which has been applied to him and to Berkeley. An imagist is defined to be a person who holds that the basic symbols of thinking are images and that other symbols must be 'cashable' in terms of these. On this definition Berkeley is not an imagist for he allows thinking with the aid of sense-data, 'ideas of sense'. If we are to convict Hume of imagism we should need to know his view about thinking with words. Did he hold that 'words are cheques

which must be cashable in terms of pictures ? I do not think that he anywhere says so. Does he equate thinking with having or dealing with ideas, i.e. pictures ? I think the answer is again, No. It is not clear then that Hume is explicitly committed to imagism.

Let us look now at Hume's theory of belief. To believe, he tells us, is to have an enlivened, vivacious, forcible idea, an idea accompanied by a special feeling. Hume has trouble in describing what he means by vivacity or by this special feeling and in the end he informs us that we all know what it is. If we look for the source of his trouble we find it mainly in his failure to recognize the dispositional nature of belief. To take a Humian type of example, let us compare recalling a visit to Paris with imagining a visit to that city. The former is accompanied by belief; the latter is not. In both cases there may be imagery, but in the case of recall there are likely to be also certain expectations and other dispositions; for example, we expect that if we questioned our travel agent he would confirm that he sold us a ticket and booked us a seat. To believe is, inter alia to have such preparednesses; we are prepared to feel surprised, relieved, satisfied, and so on. Hume, therefore, in seeking for an actual feeling was looking for the wrong thing; he should have been looking for a hypothetical or potential feeling.

Instead, then, of saying with Hume that ideas are vivified we ought rather to say that they are potentially vivified. How this takes place is, in Hume's view, largely a matter of association. Ideas become vivified through

association with forcible perceptions, viz., those of sense and, memory. Thus we may begin by merely fancying a visit to Paris; then we manage to link it with a remembered visit to Venice and the Paris experience now becomes a memory.

Contemporary psychology might amplify and re-word all this, but in broad terms what Hume asserts would not be disputed.

But association does not work only as a vivifier; it is also a factor in the ordering of ideas. Much has been written about association both before and after Hume, but there is one detail in his treatment which can be regarded as his special contribution to the subject. This is his galley-theory. We have referred to it incidentally already, but we must now consider it more closely. The theory, as we noted, appears in two contexts, first in connection with the formation of such concepts as perfect equality, perfect identity of colour or a perfect octave, and secondly as a stage in the process by which we come to believe in 'body'.

To take the first context : experience gives us examples of equality, varying from the pretty rough to the exact - the tailor's tape to the electron-microscope. Strictly, in Hume's view, our exact notion of equality is just the most refined case that experience affords us. We have, however, some reason to believe that there are 'insensible portions' of a line. Now if an insensible portion were removed from one or two sensibly equal lines, we might proceed to infer that the lines would be no longer equal. But we should then, Hume considers, be using a fictitious standard of equality. The mind has reached this standard by proceeding with the 'action, even after the reason has ceased, which first determined it

to begin'. He accounts likewise for the way in which we reach an 'obscure and implicit notion of a perfect and entire equality' in the case of time, of sound, of colour-matching and of motion.

Before we comment let us look at the second of the two contexts in which the galley-theory appears, the discussion of our belief in 'body'. I hear, let us suppose, a creak behind me. Such a creak has in the past usually or often gone with seeing my door. If habit were the only principle available then I should expect to see my door. But I do not; I am looking the other way. Still I do tend to suppose the door is there. The explanation - or part of it - is that the imagination when once on the trial of uniformity, keeps it up, even to the extent of postulating unperceived perceptions.

What are we to say of this galley-process? Are we to agree that it is a general tendency of the human mind - shared by all? Or might it characterize only some minds, in some situations?

First, it is pretty clear that Hume is not in fact, whatever he ought to have been doing, thinking of the galley-process as one of imagining in the sense of having images. 'An obscure and implicit notion of a perfect and entire equality' could hardly be a mental image. And we remember the scorn with which Hume treats a theory that deals in unperceived perceptions. If the view had been, per contra, that the gaps in sense-experience are filled by mental images, Hume's scorn would have been uncalled for. The imaginative gap-filling, whether extrapolation or interpolation, is, as

we decided at an earlier stage in this chapter, a matter of supposition, illusory supposition or worse, in Hume's view. It is, moreover, a supposition of the 'vulgar', an illusory fiction.

Can we agree? A proper discussion of this question would, indeed, require a separate book. The theory of sensation and the nature of scientific method are concerned. Here only the most summary of answers can be given. What Hume is describing and deprecating is, in fact, science - or, at least, certain premisses of science. When a mathematician treats of equal lines, he is dealing with that equality which Hume has dismissed. Carpenters' or even physicists' equality is not the geometer's concern. He arrives at his exact equality by definition - however difficult and controversial the process may be. To ridicule this is to ridicule mathematics. And mathematics works.

Similarly, continuing bodies and processes are a postulate of physics. The physicist cannot prove that the same things happen in his test-tubes while he is away for lunch as would have happened if he had eaten sandwiches in the laboratory. But to deny that they do would entail a very complicated physics. Nobody seems keen to pay this price.

It follows, then, that if we are not to dispense with mathematics and natural science we must accept the imaginative processes Hume deprecates; or rather, we must accept what he regards to be the results of such processes, namely perfect equality, unperceived bodies or events and the rest. But there is the further question, Do we reach our notions of equality and of unperceived existence in the way Hume describes? How valid is his account of imaginative interpolation and extrapo-

-lation as a description of how our minds work ? Take equality. Do we reach it by letting our galley glide on into the dim cavern until we are halted by its inner wall ? The implication; accepted by Hume, is that our notion of perfect equality is obscure, or worse. In fact, however, the mathematician proceeds differently. He observes a rough equality by using his senses; he is then prompted to make a definition. The definition will owe something to the experiences which prompted it, though possibly not very much. The mathematician who propounds it will certainly offer it as a clear conception, and would refuse to accept the dark-cavern allegory.

Still, Hume might reply, whatever about the mathematician, plain men think in the way I have described. But do they ? I suppose the answer is that sometimes they do, sometimes they do not. Reflection on a series of more and more equal equalities may lead one man on, but another man not. Similarly with Hume's other examples: musicians may look for better and better sound-equalities, artists or manufacturers for more and more exact colour-matches.

How does the other type of imaginative invention stand - the belief in unperceived bodies ? Have we here a general tendency of the human mind, as opposed to some specialized interests ? Let us see what Hume says, 'objects', he tells us, 'have a certain coherence even as they appear to our senses; but this coherence is much greater and more uniform, if we suppose the objects to have a continued existence; and as the mind is once in the train of observing an uniformity among objects, it naturally continues till it renders the uniformity as complete as possible.' Much more, Hume adds,

needs to be said to explain 'so vast and edifice, as is that of the continued existence of all external bodies'. And this he proceeds to say.

Why does Hume think we must invoke this tendency of the mind, what Professor Price has called Hume's 'inertia-principle' ? Hume thinks we must invoke this tendency because he believes that the supposition of unperceived objects can not be explained by appeal to past experience only. His argument here' is not easy to follow, but it seems to hinge on the distinction between 'objects of sense' and 'mere perceptions'. Our 'mere perceptions' have shown in the past a certain degree of regularity. But in postulating unperceived objects we are exceeding what past experience would justify. Objects as perceived by us in the past are frequently interrupted. What we are now doing is to suppose an unperceived existence in order to save the hypothesis that our past experience has been of uninterrupted objects. The supposition therefore calls for some explanation, and part of this explanation comes from the inertia-principle.

Hume completes his explanation by studying the 'constancy' of our experience and noting how the supposition of continued existence is converted into belief. This treatment of constancy, however, takes us beyond the galley-theory which is concerned only with coherence.

Hume, of course, is far from sympathizing with the movement of the imagination he has described. The vulgar belief in unperceived perceptions, though explicable, is false. And he compares this belief with two other pieces of imaginative acceptance. There is the belief in causality, also grounded on

imagination; this belief may or may not be true. And there is the philosopher's belief in a double existence - matter and sense-perceptions - which also may or may not be true; it can be contrary to the belief in causality. Thus we have one case of imagination leading to a clearly false belief and two other cases in which we believe without reason.

Hume's galley-theory as an explanation, or part-explanation, of the belief in 'body' obviously raises a number of large questions. Is he right, for example, in thinking that the belief in question cannot be explained by past experience? Is the explanation he offers sufficient? Does it cohere with other principles in his philosophy? These and connected problems have been discussed by Humian and Kantian scholars, notably by Professor H.H.Price in his book on Hume. To attempt to consider them here would be only to scratch at the surface and I shall be content with having traced the path which leads to them. That path is one route in the complex itinerary which Hume's copious use of the term 'imagination' has require us to follow.

Let us, in concluding our treatment of Hume, consider the use he makes of imagination in connection with morals. A survey of the numerous contexts in which the term imagination occurs in Book II of the Treatise shows that what Hume usually has in view is the non-rational connections between our ideas. Compare, for example, his discussion of property. He notes that the owner of a field is regarded as the owner of the river which borders the field (presumably as far as mid-stream), provided the river is reasonably narrow. We do not however apply such a principle to the Rhine or the Danube. The

difference in our judgment here is hardly based on reason. Again, if a piece of land became wrenched from one bank and joined to the opposite bank 'it becomes not his property, whose land it falls on, till it unite with the land, and till the trees or plants have spread their roots into both. Before that, the imagination doth not sufficiently join them.' Sympathy again is another notable example of non-rational connection. From the sight of a child in pain, I have an idea of pain, I think what it would be like to have the pain myself, i.e. the idea of pain becomes associated with the impression of myself; but the impression of myself is a lively impression and, accordingly, the idea I have of the child's pain is vivified and changed into an impression, i.e. I sympathize with his pain. If the child is, in addition, my child, the association with the impression of myself will be still stronger, the resulting impression more forcible and the sympathy deeper.

If we turn to Hume's Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals we find, indeed, little or nothing of all this. Reason is certainly still subordinate, but it is subordinate now to sentiment rather than to imagination. And he dissuades us from enquiring into the origin of moral sentiments, particularly the sentiment of benevolence. But this difference between the Treatise and the Enquiry may, once again, be pruning rather than retraction. He wants in the Enquiry to stress the 'original' nature of benevolence; it is convenient to omit his account of sympathy and he had to omit something.

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