

# Hume's Source of the "Impression-Idea" Distinction\*

## *La fuente de Hume de la distinción "impresión-idea"*

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### **Abstract**

In this paper I aim to investigate Hume's well-known distinction between impressions and ideas, following the methodology of the history of ideas, and showing its specificity and suggesting a possible source, which has not been given much attention by the scholarship, namely the logical doctrines of the physician and anatomist William Harvey, which provide the key concepts to understand Hume's logic of ideas. After some introductory remarks, the second part deals with the many issues involved in Hume's distinction, and in the third part I examine Harvey's logic of ideas. In conclusion I assess Hume's debt to the English physician.

*Keywords:* Hume, Harvey, Impressions, Ideas, Logic.

### **Resumen**

En este artículo se pretende investigar la conocida distinción de Hume entre impresiones e ideas, siguiendo la metodología de la historia de las ideas, y mostrando su especificidad a la par que se sugiere una posible fuente a la que la investigación no ha prestado excesiva atención, esto es, las doctrinas lógicas del médico y anatomista William Harvey. Éstas ofrecen los conceptos clave para entender la lógica

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\* Quotations are from the critical edition, *The Clarendon Edition of the Works of David Hume: E=An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2006); *T=Treatise of the Human Nature*, edited by David F. Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 1-405. Norton's edition of the *Treatise* contains also the *Abstract=A*.

de las ideas humeana. Tras algunas consideraciones introductorias, la segunda parte trata de numerosas cuestiones presentes en la distinción de Hume, y en la tercera parte se examina la lógica de las ideas de Harvey. En la conclusión se pone de manifiesto la deuda de Hume hacia el médico inglés.

*Palabras clave:* Hume, Harvey, Impresiones, Ideas, Lógica.

## I. Introduction

Scholars of Hume have often treated the "impression-idea" distinction as a commonplace. It is a quite simple doctrine, and from the psychological standpoint not very innovative: external objects affect the mind, producing impressions, and from them are generated ideas. This process of reflection from things to impressions and then to ideas has a long history traceable directly to Aristotle's doctrines in his book *On the soul* 3.3.<sup>1</sup> But Hume's distinction is a part of a broader and more complex epistemological account that involves various aspects and elements of the so-called facultative logic, or logic of ideas, which arose in the mid-seventeenth century.<sup>2</sup>

I aim to show that the Humean distinction is not so easily inscribable within the context of the various epistemological attempts developed in the late seventeenth and the early eighteenth century, and that if its psychological aspect is quite simple, the same cannot be said about the epistemic standpoint of Hume's theory of knowledge.<sup>3</sup> In fact, Hume's distinction, despite all the other approaches elaborated in that period, presents some peculiarities, which could characterize a second and

<sup>1</sup> We must be careful to distinguish "reflection" as a process of mirroring (or copying) a thing, an image or an idea in the mind, just as a beam of light reflects on glass or a body reflects in a mirror, from "reflection" as a process of the mind to take notice of its states and operations, such as perceiving, thinking, doubting, believing, reasoning, willing etc.

<sup>2</sup> On facultative logic or logic of ideas cf. James G. Buickerood, "The Natural History of the Understanding: Locke and the Rise of Facultative Logic in the Eighteenth Century," *History and Philosophy of Logic*, 6 (1985): 157-190; Sylvain Auroux, *La logique des idées* (Montréal: Bellarmin, 1993); Frederick S. Michael, *Why Logic Became Epistemology: Gassendi, Port Royal and the Reformation in Logic*, in Patricia A. Easton (ed.), *Logic and the Workings of the Mind* (Atascadero: Ridgeview, 1997), 1-20.

<sup>3</sup> Epistemic logic is the logic of knowledge and of the various degrees of belief and evidence. Hume explicitly characterizes his work as an epistemic logic: "The celebrated *Monsieur Leibnitz* has observed it to be a defect in the common systems of logic, that they are very copious when they explain the operations of the understanding in the forming of demonstrations, but are too concise when they treat of probabilities, and those other measures of evidence on which life and action entirely depend ... The author of the *Treatise of Human Nature* seems to have been sensible of this defect in these philosophers, and has endeavoured, as much as he can, to supply it (*A*, 408)." Cf. Jaakko Hintikka, *Knowledge and Belief. An Introduction to the Logic of the Two Notions* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1962).

revolutionary "new way of ideas" after that of Locke.<sup>4</sup> Not by chance, Wolfgang H. Müller in his entry "Eindruck" in the *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* states that Hume is credited with having introduced into the philosophical lexicon for the first time the concept of an "impression", and with having consistently opposed to it the concept of an "idea".<sup>5</sup> What is particular in the Humean "impression-idea" distinction that makes it so historically innovative from the epistemic standpoint? Two simple things: 1) ideas are copies of impressions; 2) impressions are more vivid, clear, and distinct than ideas, and therefore they have higher epistemic value – that is to say, they provide a better knowledge of their object. These are two original elements in the history of logic and of epistemology because the former inverts the prevailing Platonic belief that images and impressions are copies of ideas, and the latter inverts the common (e.g. Lockean) position that ideas are the first object of knowledge.

Intellectual historians have not given extensive consideration to these two aspects,<sup>6</sup> while philosophers have focused on the theoretical import of this approach and on its consistency, without advancing any historical claim.<sup>7</sup> The present study aims to analyze the Humean distinction from a historical perspective, demonstrating its particular features and suggesting a possible source, which has been given little attention by previous scholars,<sup>8</sup> namely the logical doctrines of the physician and anatomist William Harvey.

## II. Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas

Hume introduces the "impression-idea" distinction for the first time in his *Treatise of Human Nature* (1739), and he recalls it in *An Enquiry concerning*

<sup>4</sup> Cf. John W. Yolton, "John Locke and the Seventeenth-Century Logic of Ideas," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 16 (1955): 431-52; Robert McRae, "Idea as a Philosophical Term in the Seventeenth Century," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 26 (1965): 175-190; John W. Yolton, "Ideas and Knowledge in Seventeenth-Century Philosophy," *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 13 (1975): 145-65.

<sup>5</sup> Wolfgang Hermann Müller, *Eindruck*, in Joachim Ritter (ed.), *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie* vol. 4 (Basel: Schwabe, 1972), 4681-84.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. John W. Yolton, *Hume's Ideas*, in Id., *Perceptual Acquaintance from Descartes to Reid* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 181-202.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Saul Traiger, "Impressions, Ideas, and Fictions," *Hume Studies*, 13 (1987): 381-99; Wayne Waxman, *Hume's Theory of Consciousness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Harold W. Noonan, *Hume on Knowledge* (London: Routledge, 1999), 51-90; Jonathan Bennet, *Learning from Six Philosophers*, vol. 2 (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 197-220; Janet Broughton, *Impressions and Ideas*, in Saul Traiger (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hume's "Treatise"* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 43-58; Don Garrett, *Hume's Theory of Ideas*, in Elizabeth S. Radcliffe (ed.), *A Companion to Hume* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008), 41-57.

<sup>8</sup> For a complete survey of Hume's sources for his philosophy of mind, cf. Oliver A. Johnson, *The Mind of David Hume: A Companion to Book I of A Treatise of Human Nature* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 15-36.

*Human Understanding* (1748/1758). In both works, the distinction occupies a prominent position in Hume's logic, appearing in the first chapter devoted to the explanation of the origin of ideas.

In the initial statement of the *Treatise* Hume asserts that all the perceptions of the human mind are of two distinct kinds: impressions and ideas. He also adds that "it will not be very necessary to employ many words in explaining this distinction," as if this distinction were an established commonplace. But in reality things are different and Hume is aware of his conceptual innovation, stating that:

I here make use of these terms, *impression* and *idea*, in a sense different from what is usual, and I hope this liberty will be allow'd me. Perhaps I rather restore the word, *idea*, to its original sense, from which Mr. *Locke* had perverted it, in making it stand for all our perceptions. By the term of impression I wou'd not be understood to express the manner in which our lively perceptions are produced in the soul, but merely the perceptions themselves; for which there is no particular name either in the *English* or any other language that I know of (*T*, 7).

The passage of the *Treatise* has a counterpart in the *Enquiry*:

Here therefore 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. The less forcible and lively are commonly denominated thoughts or ideas. The other species want a name in our language, and in most others; I suppose, because it was not requisite for any, but philosophical purposes, to rank them under a general term or appellation. Let us, therefore, use a little freedom, and call them *Impressions*; employing that word in a sense somewhat different from the usual. By the term *impression*, then, I mean all our more lively perceptions, when we hear, or see, or feel, or love, or hate, or desire, or will. And impressions are distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious, when we reflect on any of those sensations or movements above mentioned (*E*, 13).

These two passages reveal three important issues related to Hume's distinction. First, he aims to restore the original meaning of the word "idea;" second, he does not follow Locke's doctrine that an idea "stands for whatsoever is the object of the understanding when a man thinks ... or whatever it is which the mind can be employed about in thinking;"<sup>9</sup> third, there was no corresponding English word for his notion of "impression" as "lively perception," and therefore his usage is a complete novelty in the philosophical lexicon. Hume clarifies these three claims in his further treatment of the distinction, but they still remain very problematic.

The main difference between impressions and ideas lies in the degrees of force and liveliness with which they affect the mind and make their way into thought.

<sup>9</sup> John Locke, *The Works of John Locke* vol. 1 (London: Rivington, 1824), 6.

Perceptions that affect the mind with the most "force and violence" are impressions and under this name Hume comprehends all sensations, passions, and emotions, as they make their *first and original appearance* in the soul. By ideas, he means the faint and bland images of the impressions in thinking and reasoning (*T*, 7). For Hume, this distinction is as clear and requires as little explanation as that between feeling and thinking:

There is a considerable difference between the perceptions of the mind, when a man feels the pain of excessive heat, or the pleasure of moderate warmth, and when he afterwards recalls to his memory this sensation, or anticipates it by his imagination (*E*, 13).

The mind, according to Hume, readily and naturally distinguishes the variations of degree between impressions and ideas, as it clearly perceives the differences when one is feeling, remembering, imagining, and thinking, even if in particular circumstances impressions and ideas may very nearly approach each other so that they seem similar, because the latter can be so faint as to be indistinguishable from the former.

Impressions and ideas differ in their degree of force and vivacity, but they have a "great resemblance" among them, so much so that ideas seem to be the reflection of the impressions. In fact, the faculties of the mind can copy the perceptions of the senses in the intellect, but they can never entirely reach the force and liveliness of the original feeling (*T*, 8). For this reason all perceptions present a double aspect, appearing as both impressions and ideas. Hume's example is particularly clear: when we shut our eyes and think of our chamber, the ideas that we form are exact representations of the impressions we felt. Thus Hume establishes his so-called "copy principles", according to which "ideas and impressions appear always to correspond to each other (*T*, 8)." The correspondence between impressions and ideas is first of all a *relation* of resemblance between them based on reflection, and in particular Hume points out that the ideas resemble impressions; in fact, considering the order of appearance, impressions always take precedence over their corresponding ideas: any impression either of the mind or body is constantly followed by an idea, which resembles it and differs only in its degree of force and liveliness, while ideas never produce corresponding impressions (*T*, 8). Hume's original standpoint reverses the relation of resemblance between impressions and ideas that was conceived within the Platonic tradition.

In the tenth book of the *Republic*, in dealing with the power of the Demiurge to imitate the eternal ideas, Plato asserts that human beings are also able to imitate ideas: it would be as if "to take a mirror and carry it about everywhere" (596D-E). In this way we can "speedily produce the sun and all the things in the sky, and speedily the earth and [our]self and the other animals and implements and

plants and all the objects" (596 E). But Plato is aware that all the things mirrored are nothing more than appearances, and not realities. The painter operates in a similar way in producing the appearance of something: he paints something that resembles a real being but is not that – it is "only a faint adumbration in comparison with reality" (597 A). According to Plato, impressions, images and everything that comes from sensation are only faint and dim appearances of the ideas: only ideas retain truth and reality. Therefore, while for Platonists perceptions and impressions resemble ideas and are copies of them, for the Scottish philosopher it is exactly the reverse. Hume's anti-Platonic approach is striking because the philosopher aims to "restore the word, *idea*, to its original sense," but its original meaning is evidently the exemplar of sensations, impressions, and perceptions and not the faint copy of them. From where does Hume get his view about the original meaning of "idea"? Why does he consider his the traditional sense and the oldest? Scholarship has never provided satisfactory answers to these questions, but a careful analysis of Hume's distinction may help to solve the problem.

Hume goes further in dividing all ideas and impressions into simple and complex. He states that many complex ideas never have impressions corresponding to them and that many complex impressions are not exactly copied in ideas:

I can imagine to myself such a city as the *New Jerusalem*, whose pavement is gold and walls are rubies, tho' I never saw any such. I have seen *Paris*; but shall I affirm I can form such an idea of that city, as will perfectly represent all its streets and houses in their real and just proportions? (*T*, 8)

Hume concludes that there is no universally true rule by which *complex* ideas can be shown to be exact copies of impressions, but it is certain that "*all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*" (*T*, 9).

The difference of degree in force and liveliness between impressions and ideas lies in their different origins. Since impressions are prior to their corresponding ideas, the origin of the latter depends on that of the former. Impressions can be generated either by sensation or by reflection. Generation by sensation is almost obscure for Hume; in fact, impressions of sensation "arise in the soul originally, from unknown causes" (*E*, 131):

As to those impressions, which arise from the senses, their ultimate cause is, in my opinion, perfectly inexplicable by human reason, and 'twill always be impossible to decide with certainty, whether they arise immediately from the object, or are produc'd by the creative power of the mind, or are deriv'd from the author of our being (*T*, 59).

It is not Hume's specific purpose to explain how impressions arise from the senses, for, in his logic of ideas, it is sufficient to draw "inferences from the coherence of

our perceptions, whether they be true or false; whether they represent nature justly, or be mere illusions of the senses" (*T*, 59).<sup>10</sup> The task must be accomplished by "anatomists and natural philosophers" (*T*, 11). Hume is probably arguing that only anatomists and natural philosophers can provide a full explanation of the hidden and obscure processes concerning our sense organs, nerves, and brains. This is an important remark, as we shall see, in connection with Hume's characterization of his method of enquiry as an "anatomy" of the human mind based upon experience (*A*, 407).

However, despite this limitation and even without an account of the generation of impressions from sensation, Hume's ambition is to explain the formation of impressions from reflection, which are based on the generation of ideas from sensation: thus, the process of transition from impressions of sensation to ideas of sensation becomes central to understand all mental activities.

We can find a sort of explanation of this reflective process in the *Treatise*. The solution is not completely new in the history of philosophy, and is connected with the various interpretations of the Aristotelian passage at *Posterior Analytics* 2.19, where the Stagirite explains the formation of notions from sensation as a form of sublimation. The process of forming an idea of sensation in Hume is quite similar. An impression first affects the senses and makes the mind perceive pleasure or displeasure, hot or cold, sweet or bitter etc. Of this impression a copy is generated in the mind and remains after the impression ceases: this is what Hume calls an "idea." When this idea operates in the soul, causing for instance the feeling of love or of fear, it generates impressions of reflection, in such a way that the latter are antecedent to their own corresponding ideas, but always posterior to the ideas of sensation, from which they are derived (*T*, 11). But impressions of reflection can be copied by memory and imagination, becoming ideas of reflection. These various reflective processes of transition from impressions of sensation to ideas of sensation, and again from impressions of reflection to ideas of reflection, imply a sort of "distortion" or "refraction" of the copies, just as light is distorted when it travels through a glass, otherwise ideas would be identical to impressions. In this distortion, ideas lose some of the force and liveliness of the impressions. When any impression has already been present in the mind and makes its second appearance as an idea, it is recalled either by memory or by imagination: by memory perception retains its first vivacity, while in imagination the perception is faint and languid – that is, "it entirely loses that vivacity, and is a perfect idea" (*T*, 11).<sup>11</sup> Hume provides a noteworthy example of this loss of vivacity:

<sup>10</sup> In the *Abstract* Hume points out that the final end of his epistemology is to elaborate a logic to explain the principles and the operations of the mind and the nature of ideas (*A*, 407).

<sup>11</sup> On various degrees of force and liveliness of ideas in memory, cf. Oliver Johnson, "Lively Memory and Past Memory," *Hume Studies*, 13 (1987): 343-59.



A painter, who intended to represent a passion or emotion of any kind, wou'd endeavour to get a sight of a person actuated by a like emotion, in order to enliven his ideas, and give them a force and vivacity superior to what is found in those, which are mere fictions of the imagination. The more recent this memory is, the clearer is the idea; and when after a long interval he would return to the contemplation of his object, he always find its idea to be much decay'd, if not wholly obliterated (*T*, 60).

Hume is undoubtedly attacking Plato's doctrine by diminishing the role of the ideas in favour of the impressions. He individuates three kinds of relation between impressions and ideas, which respectively characterize three different degrees of vivacity: 1) the object is present, the idea is as vivid as the impression; 2) the object is absent, it is remembered, the idea is faint and languid corresponding to how recent the memory is; 3) the object is absent, it is imagined, the idea is very faint and it is called properly by its name. This process of sublimation and vanishing of the vivacity is crucial in Hume's epistemic logic because upon it depends our degree of assent to or belief in knowledge:

... *belief* or *assent*, which always attends the memory and senses, is nothing but the vivacity of those perceptions they present; and that this alone distinguishes them from the imagination. To believe is in this case to feel an immediate impression of the senses, or a repetition of that impression in the memory. 'Tis merely the force and liveliness of the perception, which constitutes the first act of the judgment, and lays the foundation of that reasoning, which we build upon it, when we trace the relation of cause and effect (*T*, 61).

The force and liveliness of the perceptions distinguish the epistemic value between impressions and ideas. Impressions are more vivid and therefore have a superior epistemic value to that of ideas – that is, they 1) render realities more present to the mind than fictions, 2) cause them to weigh more in the thought, and 3) give them a superior influence on the passions and imagination (*T*, 68). Hume's standpoint is therefore the opposite of that of the Platonic tradition, which attributed to the ideas the highest epistemic value and reduced impressions to mere illusions. According to Hume, impressions are vivid and distinct and provide a clear and precise knowledge, while ideas are obscure, so difficult to know that they can be confused with each other:

All ideas ... are naturally faint and obscure: the mind has but a slender hold of them: they are apt to be confounded with other resembling ideas; ... On the contrary, all impressions, that is, all sensations, either outward or inward, are strong and vivid: the limits between them are more exactly determined; nor is it easy to fall into any error or mistake with regard to them (*E*, 16).

In Hume, impressions and ideas differ not only in regard to their epistemic value in vivacity and liveliness, but also in regard to their application. In fact,



all impressions and ideas are particular in their nature, but the latter can serve as universals. This is the specific case of abstract ideas, which are in themselves individual, but may become general in their representation (*T*, 18). This kind of application is possible for Hume because the mind collects all possible determinations (especially the degrees of quantity and quality) of particular things, and when it finds resemblance among several objects—whatever differences it may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality and whatever other differences may appear among them—it applies the same general name to all of them in such a way that it forms a general abstract idea. In referring frequently to these kind of ideas, which are particular in their nature but serve as general notions, the mind acquires the habit of surveying all the similar particulars that fall under the idea. Therefore a particular idea becomes general by being annexed to a general term, which “from a customary conjunction has a relation to many other particular ideas, and readily recalls them in the imagination” (*T*, 20). Hume concludes that if ideas are particular in their nature and finite in their number, deriving from their respective impressions, it is “only by custom they can become general in their representation, and contain an infinite number of other ideas under them” (*T*, 21). Only custom as a habit therefore distinguishes ideas from impressions in their application and can provide general ideas, which the mind often uses in its reasonings (*T*, 20).

In the *Enquiry*, in dealing with the “impression-idea” distinction, Hume introduces another important topic concerning innate ideas. He argues against Locke’s criticism of innatism and his conception of ideas as standing for every perception, sensation, and passion, as well as thought. Admitting the “impression-idea” distinction in the sense explained above, Hume understands by innate “what is original or copied from no precedent perception,” in such a way that “all our impressions are innate, and our ideas not innate” (*E*, 16). Hume is claiming that innate means something original, such as the impressions of sensation, from which the derived knowledge of ideas proceeds, and he believes that “no more was meant by those, who denied innate ideas, than that all ideas were copies of our impressions” (*E*, 16). On one side Hume is attacking Locke’s conception of innatism, according to which ideas are something inborn in the mind, and on the other side he is criticizing Plato’s doctrine that ideas are eternal exemplars of natural things. But in this passage, Hume seems also to solve the vicious circle of the Aristotelian doctrine that all knowledge is framed out of preceding knowledge, which at the time was considered by the Aristotelians as a form of innatism.<sup>12</sup> In fact, either all knowledge comes from preceding knowledge, in which case the latter would

<sup>12</sup> Among the many English Aristotelians of the time that deal with the problem of this form of innatism see John Flavell, *Tractatus de demonstratione methodicus et polemicus* (Oxford: Lichfield, 1619), b. 2, 108-109: “*omnis cognitio intellectiva oritur ex praecedente cognitione: non autem ex praecedente cognitione intellectiva (ita enim daretur processus in infinitum) ergo praecedente sensitiva.*”

also have to come from preceding knowledge, and so on *ad infinitum*, rendering all knowledge impossible, or knowledge comes from preceding innate knowledge. But since no inborn knowledge is possible, according to the Aristotelian view of the intellect as a *tabula rasa*, the latter case would have resulted in a paradox. But if by "innate", in Hume's words, we understand the original knowledge that is produced in its *first appearance* by sensation through impressions, the Aristotelian statement that all knowledge comes from previous knowledge is easily explainable: it means no more than that ideas and impressions of reflection are always derived from the impressions of sensation, which are original and for this reason innate. In Hume's mind, Locke's criticism means that ideas are not innate because prior to ideas there are impressions, but since Locke deals with both ideas and impressions, we can say that for Hume the Lockean standpoint is definitely wrong since he does not admit either innate or original impressions in that sense (A, 408-409).

Hume's distinction therefore has the following peculiar characteristics in comparison to the "old" and "new" "way of ideas": 1) ideas are copies of impressions and derived from them; 2) the original sense of "idea" is to be a copy, in opposition to the Platonic tradition; 3) there was no specific word in the English language to express his notion of "impression"; 4) impressions and ideas differ in degree of force and liveliness, the former providing a more precise and distinct knowledge; 5) there are complex ideas without any corresponding impression, they are mere fictions of the mind; 6) the process of formation of an idea from the impression, through memory and imagination, implies a loss of vivacity; 7) the explanation of this process pertains to anatomists and natural philosophers; 8) impressions of sensation are innate in the sense that they are original and not copies of something else, and are grounds of the knowledge of ideas.

Hume's conception of the "impression-idea" distinction is highly original and complex, and it has been considered a novelty in the history of philosophy, but we can find a similar account in William Harvey's logic of ideas, which was probably the source of the Scottish philosopher's distinction.

### III. Harvey's logic of ideas

Harvey is one the most famous and most studied physicians in the history of medicine for his discovery of the circulation of the blood, but scholarship has often neglected his contribution to the field of the logic of ideas, presented in the preface to his *Exercitationes de generatione animalium* (1651),<sup>13</sup> where he outlines the method of the anatomist in acquiring scientific knowledge. In this short preface,

<sup>13</sup> Cf. William Harvey, *Exercitationes de generatione animalium* (=GA) (Elzeviri: Amsterdam, 1651). The English quotations are from William Harvey, *Anatomical Exercitations, concerning the Generation of Living Creatures* (=AE) (London: Young, 1653). The original spelling has been retained.

Harvey develops a logic which closely follows the Aristotelian methodology that he learned in his youth in Padua.<sup>14</sup> Harvey's logic of ideas "in terms of the discussion of method, the structure of science, how knowledge is obtained, ... is very close" to the late sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century Aristotelian treatises of logic such as Jacopo Zabarella's *Opera logica* (1589), but applied to a specific, concrete empirical science.<sup>15</sup>

According to Harvey, there is only one way to acquire knowledge, and this proceeds from what is most knowable to what is less knowable, from what is more evident to what is more obscure. Science has the aim of acquiring knowledge of the most general ideas, and the mind itself reasons from these ideas to particulars. However, the understanding of general ideas by the mind, and in particular by the intellect, is grounded on the perception of individual things by means of sensation. Thus for Harvey it is necessary to explain how the mind grasps general ideas from particulars (*GA*, 19; *AE*, a6v-a7v).

All knowledge begins from sensation and proceeds from a precise knowledge of the particulars to a confused knowledge of the general ideas. The object of knowledge is always perceived as singular from the external sensation; but when the impression of the external senses is abstracted from the thing itself, and judged and conceived by inner sense, it becomes something faint and more general.<sup>16</sup> According to Harvey, in its loss of vivacity an idea loses its specific determinations, becoming more general. If we have clear and direct perception of a distinct person (an impression by sensation of it, in Hume's words), we can say that it is either Socrates or Callias, but if we see the same person from afar, we are no longer able to distinguish Socrates from Callias; rather, we recognize a person, who, in Harvey's eyes, is always something singular, but in the mind is a confused general idea of what we see from afar, which operates as a universal that can be applied to both Socrates and Callias. If it is true for Harvey that there are no universals in nature, he argues that a particular can serve as a universal when our perception of it is not clear enough to distinguish it from other particulars (*GA*, 19; *AE*, a6v-a7v). The association of a particular impression with a more general idea is possible for Harvey only when the mind has acquired the habit or the custom of using the

<sup>14</sup> On Harvey's Aristotelianism, cf. Charles Schmitt, *William Harvey and Renaissance Aristotelianism. The Praefatio to De generatione animalium* (1651), in Rudolf Schmitz and Gundolf Keil (eds.), *Humanismus und Medizin* (Acta Humaniora: Weinheim, 1984), 117-38.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* 124.

<sup>16</sup> It is noteworthy that Harvey uses the notion "impression" in his work (*GA*, 26-27; *AE*, a11r-a12v), but he refers to it also with other expressions such as "sensation", "perception", "what is abstracted from sensation", etc., which in Hume's vocabulary characterizes the impressions of sensation. Cf. Kenneth R. Merrill, *Historical Dictionary of Hume's Philosophy* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow, 2008), 207-213. In this sense, the absence of a consistent terminology in Harvey's philosophy may justify Hume's complaint about the lack of a specific word for "impression".

latter instead of the former for many particulars, in such a way that at first when we see something from afar, we refer to it as a general idea, like a person, and then on closer perception we identify the person with Socrates or Callias (*GA*, 26; *AE*, a8v-a9r). Harvey's account of the acquisition of general abstract ideas by means of custom is similar to that developed by Hume, and, as we shall see below, they also share the conception that in their application and employment ideas can serve as universal (*GA*, 23; *AE*, a9r).

Harvey points out that a singular impression is clear and distinct, but appears confused and indistinct 1) when the object is removed from sight; 2) when it becomes abstracted by the imagination; or 3) when it is retained in the memory – just as Hume indicates in his *Treatise*. In these cases the singular impression is conceived as a faint and confused idea (*GA*, 21; *AE*, a8r). Therefore, according to Harvey, impressions are vivid and distinct because they refer immediately to the singular perception, while the idea is confused and indistinct because it no longer refers immediately to the object in its vivacity and liveliness.

In order to make his position clear, Harvey refers directly to Seneca's fifty-eighth *Epistle*, in which occurs the same metaphor of the painter used by Hume (and by Plato in the *Republic*):

This subtilty *Seneca* doth elegantly express, according to *Plato's* opinion. *An idea*, saith he, *is an eternal Exemplar of Natural things. I will explain this definition, that you may conceive it the better. Suppose I intend to draw your picture, you your self are the Exemplar of that picture, from whom my mind takes a representation, which she indeavoureth to pattern in her work. So then your face, which is my director, et which I labour to represent is the Idea. And a little after, he saith. In my discourse even now I made use of a picture-drawer, to illustrate what I was speaking of. He, when he would paint Virgil, his eye is upon Virgil himself: Virgils face is his Idea, and the Exemplar of his future designe: now that which the Artist takes from this Idea, and worketh off, is the Picture. If you demand the difference between these two, it is this: one is the Pattern, the other is the copy taken by the Pattern, and layed upon the work: He imitates the one, and makes the other. A statue hath a face, but that face is but the Idos, or representation: But the Exemplar which the Statuary copies out, hath a face, and that face is the Idea. Doe you desire a farther explication? Take it thus. The Idos is that which you see in the piece: the Idea is quite without the piece, and not only without it, but also had a being before the piece was at all* (*GA*, 21-22; *AE*, a8r-a9v).

In his letter Seneca, following Plato, seeks to emphasize the ontological and epistemological primacy of the ideas over impressions and sensations, whereas Harvey reverses the two terms and interprets the passage as indicating the opposite. Commenting on this passage, Harvey writes that the perception of the sensible object differs from the perception which is kept in memory and in imagination. The impression of sensation is the exemplar, the Platonic idea, the natural thing, the form

informing, while the perception in memory and in imagination is a representation, a resemblance, a similitude, a being of reason (*GA*, 23; *AE*, a9r).<sup>17</sup> He adds

That, [impression] is imployed about some *particular* thing, and is it selfe a *singular*, and an *individual*; this [idea], is a kinde of *universal* and *common* thing. [Impression] is in every *Artist* and *Philosopher*, a *sensible* thing, *clear*, and *perfect*; this [idea] belongs to the *mind*, and is *obscure*. For what we discover by *sense* is much more *sure* and *manifest*, then what we discover by the *intellect*: because the latter springs from the former, and is illustrated by it (*GA*, 23; *AE*, a9r).

Harvey reverses the epistemic relation between impressions and ideas, and impressions become the exemplars, while ideas become the copies and the resemblances. Impressions are, according to Harvey's standpoint, more sure, clear, and manifest and always concern singular things, while ideas are obscure simply because they are faint and blurred and they can serve as universal. Moreover, Harvey also states that ideas derive from impressions through a process of sublimation in which impressions lose their vivacity. On this issue, Harvey's doctrines really seem to be the source of Hume's epistemic inversion of impressions and ideas, and also of their respective characterizations as vivid or faint objects of the mind. This can also explain why Hume believed he was restoring the ancient sense of the notion "idea": he understood Plato's conception through Harvey's interpretation of Seneca's letter. Hume's assignment of the task of investigating the origin of the distinction between impressions and ideas to the anatomist and natural philosopher may be referred directly to Harvey – or at least the Scottish philosopher had in mind Harvey's anatomical and physical investigations on this matter.

But this is not all. Harvey also discusses the issue of innate ideas, as Hume does. According to Harvey, the mind contains nothing from birth: no innate knowledge, no ideas, and no customs. All knowledge is acquired through sensation (*GA*, 25; *AE*, a10r-a10v), even if this position seems to be in contrast to the Aristotelian statement that all knowledge comes from previous knowledge, which can be considered, as we have seen, as a particular kind of innatism. Harvey solves the problem by examining the passage of *Posterior Analytics* 2.19:

By *Sense* there remains an *impression* of the thing perceived; by that impression is made a *remembrance* of it, and from *multiplied memory*, proceeds *Experience*: from Experience, *Universal Reason* ... no perfect knowledge, which may be called ours, is

<sup>17</sup> The Latin is particularly significant: "In utrisque differt id, quod in rebus sensibilibus speculamur; a spectro ipso, quod in phantasia, vel memoria retinetur. Illud exemplar, Idea, forma informans; hoc imitamentum, Idos, species abstracta. Illud res naturalis, ens reale; hoc repraesentatio, sive similitudo, et ens rationis." The use of the verb "specular" and the name "spectrum" are very significant in characterizing Harvey's epistemological language concerning the reflective process of the generation of images and ideas from sensation. Images and ideas are mental mirrors of the things directly perceived by sensation.

*in us*; but such as is in some sort *derived to us* from *Experience*, and *Sense*; or is at least examined, and approved by them, and strongly grounded upon some *knowledge pre-existent* in us. For without memory, there can be no experience which is nothing else but a *multiplied memory*: neither can *memory* bee, without a *remaining impression* of the sensitive object, and the object cannot remain where it never was (*GA*, 27-28; *AE*, a11v-a12r).

Knowledge of the object by impression of sensation differs from knowledge by general idea: the 'precedent knowledge' is required only for the knowledge of ideas and is garnered only through the impressions that come from sensation. No knowledge of ideas would be possible without a pre-existing knowledge of the impression. Therefore, Harvey concludes, sensible knowledge can be conceived as innate and inborn insofar as it concerns the *first appearance* of knowledge and is the original cognition from which ideas arise.

In many points Harvey's logic of ideas seems to be the source of Hume's inspiration in conceiving his "impression-idea" distinction. It is not possible to find in any other early modern author—certainly not in Locke, nor in Burthogge, nor Carmichael, nor Berkeley— 1) such a characterization of the idea as a faint copy of the impression, 2) the inversion of epistemic value between impression and idea, and 3) the conception of the impression of sensation as inborn knowledge from which ideas are derived. It remains to be considered how Harvey could have been a source of Hume's doctrines.

### III. Hume and Harvey

In his entire work, Hume explicitly mentions the English physician just once, in his *History of England* (1754-1762), but it is very significant because it reveals his knowledge not only of Harvey's famous discovery of the circulation of the blood, but also of his lesser-known anatomical investigations on the generation of animals:

Harvey is intitled to the glory of having made, by reasoning alone, without any mixture of accident, a capital discovery in one of the most important branches of science. He had also the happiness of establishing at once his theory on the most solid and convincing proofs; and posterity has added little to the arguments suggested by his industry and ingenuity. His treatise of circulation of the blood is farther embellished by that warmth and spirit which so naturally accompany the genius of invention. This great man was much favoured by Charles I, who gave him the liberty of using all the deer in the royal forest for perfecting his discoveries on the generation of animals.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>18</sup> David Hume, *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution of 1688*, vol. 4, ed. by William B. Todd (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1983), 153.



We may suppose that Hume had in his hands on at least one occasion a copy of Harvey's *De generatione animalium*, probably in the English version, since he complains about the absence of a specific word for "impression" in English. There is nothing by Harvey in the catalogue of Hume's library, although it is well known that the compilation is not exhaustive.<sup>19</sup> We know that Hume spent much time studying at the well-furnished Library of the Advocates in Edinburgh since his university years (1725-1729), well before 1752 when he was nominated library keeper. But more importantly, Hume was involved in the newly-founded Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, of which he was secretary and editor of the proceedings of the society—*Essays and Observations, Physical and Literary*—with Alexander Monro, professor of anatomy at Edinburgh University.<sup>20</sup> Michael Barfoot's accurate study has shown that Hume's interests in physiology and anatomy can be dated back to the 1720s and 30s, and therefore we may suppose that during these years he was concerned with these issues and read various publications on the topic.<sup>21</sup>

In the *Enquiry* there is a significant reference—albeit implicit—in which Hume is undoubtedly thinking of Harvey:

The anatomical observations, formed upon one animal, are, by this species of reasoning, extended to all animals; and it is certain, that when the circulation of the blood, for instance, is clearly proved to have place in one creature, as a frog, or fish, it forms a strong presumption, that the same principle has place in all (*E*, 79).

Hume therefore must have had some acquaintance and familiarity with Harvey's works and doctrines. But probably the most important indication of Harvey's influence on Hume is the latter's constant reference to his own epistemological project as an "accurate anatomy of human nature" (*T*, 171). The method consists in a careful study of the human mind in all its facets, with respect to the cognitive process as well as to moral behaviour. The examination by means of observations and experiments on one mind is applicable to all mankind, just as the study of the anatomists on a specific body can provide precious information on the structure of all bodies. In section twelve, "Of The Pride and Humility of Animals", Hume is quite clear how this method must be applied:

'Tis usual with anatomists to join their observations and experiments on human bodies to those on beasts, and from the agreement of these experiments to derive an additional

<sup>19</sup> Cf. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.), *The David Hume Library* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Bibliographical Society, 1996).

<sup>20</sup> Cf. *The Early Days of The Royall Colledge of Phisitions*, Edinburgh (Edinburgh: Johnston, 1899), 134-36.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Michael Barfoot, *Hume and the Culture of Science in the Eighteenth Century*, in M.A. Stewart (ed.), *Studies in the Philosophy of the Scottish Enlightenment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 151-90.



argument for any particular hypothesis. 'Tis indeed certain, that where the structure of parts in brutes is the same as in men, and the operation of these parts also the same, the causes of that operation cannot be different, and that whatever we discover to be true of the one species, may be concluded without hesitation to be certain of the other. Thus tho' the mixture of humours and the composition of minute parts may justly be presum'd to be somewhat different in men from what it is in mere animals; and therefore any experiment we make upon the one concerning the effects of medicines will not always apply to the other; yet as the structure of the veins and muscles, the fabric and situation of the heart, of the lungs, the stomach, the liver and other parts, are the same or nearly the same in all animals, the very same hypothesis, which in one species explains muscular motion, the progress of the chyle, the circulation of the blood, must be applicable to every one; and according as it agrees or disagrees with the experiments we may make in any species of creatures, we may draw a proof of its truth or falsehood on the whole. Let us, therefore, apply this method of enquiry, which is found so just and useful in reasonings concerning the body, to our present anatomy of the mind, and see what discoveries we can make by it (*T*, 211-212).

Hume is implicitly comparing his anatomy of the mind with Harvey's anatomy of bodies, as the recurring references to the circulation of the blood seem to suggest. The comparison of Hume's work on mind to that on physical anatomy is so important that it occurs also in the conclusion of the *Treatise* and in the first section of the *Enquiry*, where the Scottish philosopher opposes the unentertaining but useful investigations of the anatomist to the graceful and engaging, but useless work of the painter (*T*, 395; *E*, 8).

In his recent research on Hume as a historian of science, Spencer K. Wertz has argued that Harvey was for the Scottish philosopher the idol of scientific achievement, more than Isaac Newton, and that *De motu cordis* (1628) was the only work to reach such a degree of perfection as to provide a model for empirical sciences.<sup>22</sup> If our reconstruction of Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas is correct, and if Harvey was the source of the Scottish philosopher's distinction, we can provide Wertz's argument with further evidence: we may say that Harvey was important from a historical standpoint not only for his scientific achievements, but also for his logic of ideas, which can be rightly considered a precursor of Hume's empirical epistemology.

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<sup>22</sup> Cf. Spencer K. Wertz, "Hume and the Historiography of Science," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 54 (1993): 411-36, esp. 434-35.