Hume on Ideas and Impressions (1748)

1. Ideas and Impressions: Hume begins by noting that the perceptions of memory, imagination, etc., are never as forceful or vivacious as our first-hand perceptions of the real world. Thus, he distinguishes between two sorts of perception:

(1) Impressions: These are the lively, first-hand perceptions, either of something external (e.g., sensation) or internal (e.g., emotion, desiring, willing).

(2) Ideas: These are the less forceful, less lively perceptions, which occur when we reflect on previous impressions (e.g., via the memory, imagination, etc.).

2. No innate ideas: Hume states that all of our ideas are ultimately derived from impressions. He writes, “all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones.”

This is supported by the fact that blind people, having never experienced an impression of color before, can never form an idea of color. They can’t, for instance, imagine color because they’ve never had the sensation of color.

3. New ideas: Not all ideas are exact copies of impressions, however. We can create ideas of things we have never had an impression of before (e.g., unicorns). We create these new ideas by doing one of the following four things:

- Compounding: Taking two or more impressions and adding them together (e.g., imagining a golden mountain, which = gold + mountain)

- Transposing: Taking an impression and re-arranging its parts (e.g., imagining a person with arms where their legs should be, and vice versa)

- Augmenting: Taking an impression or making it larger or greater (e.g., imagining an ant the size of an elephant)

- Diminishing: Taking an impression and making it smaller or lesser (e.g., imagining an elephant the size of an ant)

If we ever have an idea of something we’ve never seen (or known), it is only because we’re doing one or more of these four things to the ideas we have of things we HAVE seen (or known). Even our idea of God, Hume says, is merely goodness + wisdom compounded together, and then augmented infinitely, without limit.
4. Counter-example to “no innate ideas”? Hume discusses one potential counter-example to the thesis that ALL ideas are ultimately derived from impressions.

In order to understand this counter-example, we must note the following: Hume argues that every single shade must have a distinct idea associated with it, independent of the rest. If this were not the case, then it would be possible to, having seen only the color red and no other color, augment the color red over and over until one is imagining the color blue. Clearly, this is impossible. Therefore, colors can ONLY be conceived of (in idea form) if one has had a prior impression of that particular color. Now, consider the counter-example:

- The missing shade of blue: There is someone who has seen every shade of blue except one. Now, the entire spectrum of blue colors is laid out before him, save the one he has never seen before. He notices the gap in the spectrum. Would this person be capable of picturing the missing shade in their mind?

Most people think it obvious that this person WOULD be able to picture the missing shade. If this is true, then it seems that not ALL ideas are ultimately derived from previous impressions. It seems that Hume really has 3 options here:

1. Deny that all ideas are ultimately derived from impressions.
2. Deny that every shade of every color has a distinct and independent idea associated with it (thus allowing us to suppose that perhaps the missing shade COULD be derived from other impressions).
3. Deny that such a person really COULD picture the missing shade.

Strangely, Hume accepts option (1), even though this is the ONLY one of the three options that refutes his original thesis that all ideas are ultimately derived from previous experiences (impressions). If he had adopted option (2) or (3), the missing shade of blue would not be a counter-example to that thesis.

Which option do you think is the best?