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I Dream of Hume-y

“It is not entirely obvious whether dreams, hallucinations (visual or otherwise), and related phenomena should be classified as impressions or ideas. Explain the issue in your own words but referring to the text.”

In his *Treatise*, David Hume classifies impressions as, “those perceptions, which enter with most force and violence ... all our sensations, passions and emotions, as they make their first appearance in the soul.”¹ Hume classifies ideas as “the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning.”² Additionally, Hume puts forth the Copy Thesis, which holds that all simple ideas are like copies of corresponding simple impressions.³ This binary covers the majority of human experience, but there nonetheless remains a grey area in between. Hume holds that impressions always have more force and vivacity than ideas, but there are some ideas that enter the mind with such gusto that we might struggle to discern whether such a thing was but a vivacious idea or, rather, a proper impression. Hume defines two ways in which ideas can be recalled in the mind: by memory or by imagination. Memories are ideas that retain much of the vivacity and detail of the impressions that bore them, while the imagination is populated by ideas that have lost their firm association with the impressions that gave them rise and have been abstracted into their component parts, to be recombined in any number of ways.⁴

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 7.

² Hume, *Treatise*, 7.

³ Hume, *Treatise*, 8-9.

⁴ Hume, *Treatise*, 11.

The distinction between vivacious ideas and proper impressions is not always immediately obvious. There exist some ideas that strike the mind with such force and with such vivacity that we seem incapable, if only for the moment, of parsing whether they are mere ideas or fully impressions. These most often manifest in the form of dreams, daydreams, or hallucinations. Even though the categorization of these phenomena may strike us as confusing and indefinite while we are experiencing it, upon reflection it is clear (save for to the disordered mind) that these liminal experiences were animated indeed by ideas, not impressions.

Dreams are activities of the mind that occur while one is asleep. Because dreams are wholly activities of the mind, occurring while no sensory states are being experienced, and only ever recombining existing ideas – in ways fantastical or realistic – dreams cannot be categorized as impressions. An impression must enter the mind with such and such qualities, but a dream does not enter the mind. A dream is *of* the mind, as it originates there and not in our sensory experience of the world. Sleeping dreams, therefore, are not impressions. Some dreams, especially those that most closely resemble the impressions that we encountered in our waking lives, can seem quite vivid and may even convince us of their validity for their duration. This is compounded, often, by the desire for such fantasies to be true, as the most vivacious dreams are frequently those born out of regret or guilt and play out in an idealized form of our experience, in which the dreamer thought of the clever retort in time, or said the right thing to charm the girl, or had kept his composure and not let slip some awful insult in an argument, and so on. To agonize over the past and what could have been are experiences nearing universality, and it is often in dreams where we express our regret and guilt with our actions of the day. However, no matter how vivacious the dream seems whilst we dream it, no matter how much we wish that the version of events in the dream matched up with that recalled by our memory, upon waking we

come to the somber – or reassuring, should the dream have been unpleasant – realization that what we had experienced was simply the mind shuffling its deck of cards and dealing itself out a different hand.

Daydreams begin to toy with the distinction between ideas and impressions. Daydreams, by their nature, appear to have qualities of both ideas and impressions, but this appearance is illusory. The way daydreams play out is broadly identical to that of sleeping dreams, in which our corpus of simple and complex ideas are broken down into their component parts and reassembled in ways resembling experience or in ways so fantastical the origin of the composite parts is not recognizable. But, also like sleeping dreams, we are usually able to tell apart memory and experience from the content of dreams once we have been (often rudely) shaken awake and returned to a fully conscious state. Daydreams manifest while one is conscious, like impressions, but they are more akin to dreams overlaid on sensory experience than sensory experiences itself. To daydream is, while retaining consciousness, to dull the vivacity of the impressions to a great degree and increase the vivacity of our imagination to an equal or seemingly greater degree. In a daydream, impressions still strike the mind, but their vivacity is deadened, and they coexist with our dreams in our conscious mind.

Hallucinations blur the distinction between the realms of impressions and ideas further. Dreams are easily dismissed as not-impressions by the fact that we are not conscious while they wash over us, and daydreams exist alongside impressions while being demonstrably not of them. Hallucinations, however, pose a greater challenge. For reason of excessive heat, or thirst, or intoxication, or madness, one may be to hallucinate. To hallucinate is to play out the copy thesis in reverse, in which ideas in the mind are projected out into the world, but are then regarded erroneously as sensory states and, through our false understanding of these mirages as

impressions, reenter the mind as impressions and come to be transformed into ideas once more.

To the hallucinator, this process is not visible and appears to be a genuine expression of the copy thesis as it normally occurs, unless one is conscious of the reason why they are experiencing hallucinations, such as intentionally being under the influence of psychedelic drugs.

Hallucinations appear to be impressions but, upon reflection, it can be discovered that their origin is in the ideas of the mind, not impressions derived from experience directly. Though convincing for their duration, hallucinations remain ideas.

Dreams, daydreams, and hallucinations may appear as threats to David Hume's binary of ideas and impressions, as they seem to bear qualities of both, but Hume's theories can be rescued from each of these objections. Dreams exist wholly in the mind, daydreams exist alongside impressions, and hallucinations erroneously present themselves as impressions but, upon reflection, it is apparent that this and each of these phenomena were ideas, not impressions. Ideas, when they strike the mind with such force and vivacity, may appear to us as impressions. This notion, however, is incorrect. Hume, frequently regarded as a champion of skepticism, would not be hard pressed to agree that humans are fallible, and can be wrong. As such, it does little or no violence to his overarching theories that a person can misconstrue an extremely vivacious dream – something from the realm of ideas – as having been an impression. The misidentification rarely persists past waking and shows only that the categories of idea and impression are sometimes porous, not that they are nonfunctional.