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FLAGE ON HUME'S ACCOUNT OF MEMORY

In the Treatise Hume writes that an impression which "has been present with the mind" may "make its appearance there as an idea," and that it can appear either through the faculty of memory or the faculty of the imagination.¹ Memory and imagination each produces its own species of idea. In "Hume on Memory and Causation"² Daniel Flage addresses Hume's carving out of these two species. Flage's main purpose is to show that Hume has a criterion for distinguishing memory ideas from others. I will argue that Flage has not located necessary and sufficient conditions for memory in Hume's discussion of memory. I will show that if Hume intended to provide a criterion at all, it is not the criterion Flage attributes to him, and that the criterion Flage has formulated is not an improvement over what appears to be Hume's criterion.

Before looking at the details of Flage's interpretation I want to mention briefly an underlying assumption of the paper. The assumption is that Hume believes that there must be a clear distinction between memories and other perceptions. The assumption is supported by the fact that Hume speaks of the species of memory. However, there is textual evidence against this assumption. In the Treatise Hume emphasizes the ways in which memories are like other perceptions. For example, Hume calls memories impressions, while in distinguishing impressions from ideas he introduces memories as paradigm examples of ideas.³ The reason Hume calls memories impressions, I believe, is that for the purpose of inference, he takes memories to be equivalent to impressions of sense. Since Hume is willing to put memories in two seemingly incompatible categories, perhaps his primary concern is with the role they play in belief; we make causal inferences

from memory and sense, not from the imagination. That Hume's primary concern is with inference, and not with memory per se, is supported by the fact that both Treatise sections devoted to memory are followed by sections which deal with causal inference.⁴ Hume thinks that we cannot always distinguish memories from other perceptions "in their operation." It is not clear that he thinks that there must be a sharp distinction at all, since the traditional epistemological purpose for such a distinction, to partition the veridical from the non-veridical, is not obviously Hume's purpose. However, Flage claims that there is a clear criterion of memory in the Treatise. Let's take a look at what he has found.

Flage maintains that Hume has both a phenomenal criterion based on vivacity which allows us in a rough and ready way to distinguish memories from imaginings "in their operation," and a formal criterion which "provides one with insight into the complex structure of an idea of memory." (p. 169) The phenomenal criterion does not distinguish memory ideas from others, since, as Hume himself allows, non-memories (e.g. beliefs, delusions, even ideas of the imagination) can have the same vivacity as memories. (Cf. T86) The marking off of memory as a distinct species is accomplished, on Flage's view, by the formal criterion. Hume writes "The chief exercise of the memory is not to preserve the simple ideas, but their order and position."⁵ (T9) This is what Flage calls Hume's formal criterion, and Flage takes it as both necessary and sufficient for being a memory idea.

Flage takes memory ideas to be what he calls relative ideas, ideas which pick out or refer to a unique item. A memory idea, on this view, is a complex idea which uniquely picks out the antecedent complex

impression which resembles and is the cause of the idea. Flage writes:

The formal criterion is basically a causal thesis: if a particular positive idea (mental image) is a genuine idea of the memory, then at some point in the past there was a complex impression that was the cause (or the original cause) of and exactly (or closely) resembles that positive idea as an idea. (p. 172)

In this formulation the criterion is a necessary condition of memory. In a subsequent formulation Flage claims its sufficiency as well. I think that the formal criterion is neither necessary nor sufficient for memory. I also think that it is not the criterion Hume intended, if he intended a criterion at all.

The formal criterion is not necessary, since it excludes simple memory ideas from the species of memory ideas. Flage thinks that for Hume there can be no simple memory ideas, that ideas of the memory and imagination must be complex, and he cites T85 in support of this. (p. 171) There Hume says that it is "a peculiar property of the memory to preserve the original order and position of its ideas, while the imagination transposes and changes them." (T85) Flage must take Hume's use of "order" here to be the arrangement of ideas within a complex idea, because only by reading "order and position" as the arrangement of ideas within a complex idea are simple ideas excluded from being memories. However Flage ignores another kind of order, the temporal order of a sequence of perceptions, and it is temporal order which Hume has in mind when he first introduced the order and position criterion at T9. To explicate "order" in memory Hume appeals to the disorder of a historical narration, when he the historian relates "an event before another, to which in fact it was posterior." Hume's use of "order"

does not concern the arrangement of constituent ideas in a complex idea. Thus Hume's notion of order does not limit memories (or imaginings) to complex ideas. Simple ideas can have a temporal order within a temporal sequence of perceptions.

In the discussion of memory and imagination in Section II of the first Enquiry, Hume's examples of the two species of memory and imagination are simple ideas:

Every one will readily allow, that 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. (E17)

Such perceptions could be constituents of complex ideas, but I see no reason to suppose that they must.⁶

Simple ideas of the memory do not meet Flage's formal criterion. More importantly, the criterion cannot be expanded to handle simple memory ideas without significant modification to what is meant by "order and position." As it stands, the formal criterion cannot distinguish the "order and position" of simple memory ideas from simple ideas of the imagination. Simple ideas have no order and position in Flage's sense.

There are also complex memory ideas which fail to satisfy the formal criterion. According to Flage, all memories are caused by and resemble complex antecedent impressions. We often remember our dreams. I remember falling off a cliff in my dream, but where is the corresponding impression? I am reassured in the knowledge that there is no resembling complex antecedent impression of my falling off a cliff. What I remember is not falling off a cliff, but dreaming that I fell off a cliff. But dreams are not

impressions, they are ideas of the imagination, and to remember a dream does not involve remembering an impression or series of impressions.

Flage might try to accommodate memory of dreams by arguing that when we have dreams we are really having impressions, not ideas. However, even if memory of dreams can be handled in this way, many other cases of memory cannot. We often remember the contents of our imaginings, and the contents of our reflections. It is implausible to suggest that any imagining or reflecting which can be remembered involves only impressions. Yet this is what Flage must say in order to save the proposed criterion.

The formal criterion is not sufficient, because there are complex ideas which are caused by resembling complex impressions but which are not memories. The imaginations of writers of fiction would be over-taxed if they had to concatenate from simple ideas every complex idea which they employ in a piece of fiction. They often rely on complex ideas which are caused by and resemble their past complex impressions in constructing a story. Such ideas meet the formal criterion, yet are not memories. I think that Flage would say that such complex ideas are not memories because they don't pick out the complex impressions which cause them. I agree. What's missing in Flage's account is an explanation of why reference fails when his order and position condition has been met. I suggest that such ideas are not memories because they don't preserve the temporal order Hume claims they must. In another (non-fictional) context those same complex ideas would be memories.

I think that Flage is on the right track insofar as he thinks that memories for Hume require a "temporal reference." Yet that temporal reference is generally not secured by the causal and resemblance

relations an idea bears to an antecedent impression, and I think that the text shows that Hume did not claim that such relations secure temporal reference. According to Hume, when we remember, we place an impression in its temporal context, its place among a temporal sequence of perceptions. Hume thought that there is a difference between remembering a simple impression and imagining that same impression, and that the difference was more than a matter of vivacity. That difference is the temporal order of the remembered impression in a temporal sequence of perceptions. Temporal order will also distinguish a complex idea as it is employed in the imagination from the same idea's employment in memory.

Finally, Flage believes that his account leads to a fundamental (though resolvable) problem concerning Hume's theory of causation. Flage writes:

But since there is often a significant temporal distance between the impression remembered and the positive component of one's relative idea of the memory, it is incumbent upon me to explain how the remembered impression and the positive idea can be causally related even though they are not temporally contiguous. (p. 168)

The fact that there is a "significant temporal distance" between a cause and its effect does not, by itself, show that temporal contiguity fails. To show this Flage must also demonstrate that there is no causal mechanism which preserves temporal contiguity between the cause and the effect.

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, L.A. Selby-Bigge, ed., (Oxford, 1888), p. 8. All references to Hume are from the Selby-Bigge edition of the Treatise of Human Nature (T) and the Nidditch/Bigge edition of the Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding (E).
2. Daniel Flage, "Hume on Memory and Causation," Hume Studies, 10th Anniversary Issue, 1985, pp. 168-188.
3. Cf. T84.
4. This point about the context in which Hume's discussion of memory appears was suggested by James Noxon in discussion.
5. At T85 Hume appears to deny this, claiming that "the memory is known, neither by the order of its complex ideas, nor the nature of its simple ones." But Hume is denying only that the formal criterion provides a means for distinguishing memory "in its operation."
6. In light of the text, I find Flage's claim that ideas of the imagination are always complex quite implausible. In discussing simple impressions and ideas in Part I, Section i, of Book I, Hume says "Our ideas upon their appearance produce not their correspondent impressions, nor do we perceive any colour, or feel any sensation merely upon thinking of them." (T5) This clearly presupposes that we can merely think of (imagine) simple ideas. In the first Enquiry Hume remarks of the imagination that "it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision." (E47, emphasis mine.) Finally, the missing shade of blue is supplied by the imagination, and is obviously taken by Hume to be a simple idea.