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Hume's Theory of Belief

Michael M. Gorman

Belief is a key concept in Hume's philosophy, and yet Hume's statements about belief appear to be hopelessly inconsistent.¹ Various solutions have been offered, from saying that Hume is incorrigibly confused to saying that his theory of belief changed over the course of his career. This article will focus on the question of the nature of belief and show that Hume's theory is in fact consistent. In sections 1 and 2, I will separate those passages where Hume discusses the nature of belief from those where he discusses other questions. In sections 3-6, I will examine his theory of the nature of belief. Finally, in section 7, I will briefly look at his theories on other questions concerning belief.

1. Hume's statements about belief can be divided into at least nine different categories. Hume says that a belief is:

1. an idea conceived in a certain manner (e.g., E 49, T 96);
2. that certain manner of conception itself (e.g., E 49, T 97);
3. an idea that feels a certain way (e.g., E 48, T 103);
4. that certain feeling itself (e.g., E 49, T 624, 629);
5. an idea that has a great influence on the mind (e.g., T 118-20);
6. an act of mind rendering realities influential on the mind (e.g., E 49, T 629);
7. a lively idea related to an impression (e.g., T 96);
8. a lively manner of conceiving an idea, which manner arises from an impression (e.g., E 50);
9. something that makes ideas forceful and vivacious (e.g., T 101, 627).

If one were in a really bad mood, one could probably split Hume's formulations into even more categories.²

2. One solution would be to say that Hume is hopelessly confused.³ This is not accurate, however. The first thing to be done is to notice that only the statements belonging to the first four categories are actually answers to the question, What is the nature of belief? Hume tells us that a belief is: an idea conceived in a certain manner, the very manner of conception of such an idea, an idea that feels a certain way, the very feeling of such an idea. To explicate Hume's theory of the nature of

belief, I will show that the second formulation is a poor version of the first and that the fourth formulation is a poor version of the third—in other words, that there are really only two theories here, not four. Then I will reconcile these two theories.

As for Hume's discussion of other questions concerning belief, the statements in the fifth and sixth categories address the question, What does a belief do? Those in the seventh and eighth categories take for granted the statements in the first and second categories respectively and address the further question, What causes beliefs? Those in the ninth category are probably cases of bad writing. All these will be examined in section 7.

3. Let us look at the texts that fit into the first and second categories listed in section 1. These express what can be called Hume's "manner-of-conception theory" (MCT). First, Hume says that a belief is a certain kind of idea, namely an idea conceived in a certain manner. He describes this manner of conception by saying that such an idea is conceived with a high degree of force and vivacity, liveliness, and so forth. This analysis rests on Hume's distinction between the content of an idea and the manner in which the idea is conceived.

[A]s 'tis certain there is a great difference betwixt the simple conception of the existence of an object, and the belief of it, and as this difference lies not in the parts or composition of the idea, which we conceive; it follows, that it must lie in the *manner*, in which we conceive it. (T 94-95)

One can believe that something is the case, or one can simply conceive of its being the case without assenting to it. In both cases, Hume says, the content of the idea must be the same. Otherwise, both making up one's mind and disagreeing with someone would be impossible: making up one's mind would be a transition from thinking about one thing to thinking about another, and disagreeing with someone would be nothing more than thinking about something that she is not thinking about. Therefore, Hume concludes, the difference must rest in the manner of conceiving: when you and I disagree, we both have the same idea-content but conceive it in a different manner. When conjoined with the premise that the only way in which two instances of the same idea can differ is by varying in force and vivacity (T 96), this leads Hume to the following conclusion:

An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd,
A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT
IMPRESSION. (T 96)

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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. (E 49).

Leaving aside for the time being the remark, in the first quoted passage, that a belief is related to a present impression, what these point to is that believing-that-*p* is distinguished from merely entertaining-that-*p*, not on the basis of the content of *p*, but on the basis of the manner in which *p* is conceived. If an idea is conceived in a sufficiently lively, forcible (etc.) manner, then that idea is a belief.

In the second formulation of the MCT, instead of describing belief as an idea conceived in a certain (lively) manner, Hume says that it is that manner itself:

belief is somewhat more than a simple idea. 'Tis a particular manner of forming an idea. (T 97)

it is evident that belief consists not in the peculiar nature or order of ideas, but in the *manner* of their conception, and in their *feeling* to the mind. (E 49)

Leaving aside for a moment the problem raised, in the second of these passages, by Hume's association of "manner of conception" with "feeling to the mind," these two passages say not that belief is an idea conceived in a certain manner, but rather that it is the very manner of conception of an idea.⁴

Does Hume have two different things in mind when he uses these two formulations? Consider again one of the passages quoted above, this time with its continuation:

belief is somewhat more than a simple idea. 'Tis a particular manner of forming an idea: And as the same idea can only be vary'd by a variation of its degrees of force and vivacity; it follows upon the whole, that belief is a lively idea produc'd by a relation to a present impression, according to the foregoing definition. (T 97)

Hume confidently states that belief is a certain manner of forming an idea, and then, in the same sentence, that it is an idea formed in a certain way. If he meant different things by these two formulations, he would not shift back and forth between them in this way. So it seems best to say that Hume here has only one theory, the theory that I am calling his MCT.

But which formulation is the correct expression of it? It is better to say that the first expresses his thought accurately, and that the second is just a loose version of the first. To begin with, it is easy to imagine how the second could be a loose version of the first, whereas the converse seems hardly possible. Furthermore, when Hume gives a formal definition of a belief in the *Treatise* (p. 96), it is the first formulation that he chooses. So, according to Hume's MCT, a belief is an idea of a certain type, namely one conceived in a sufficiently lively manner.

4. Unfortunately, the definitions of belief do not end here. There is in Hume's writings a competing "feeling theory" (FT), according to which belief is either an idea that feels a certain way or else that feeling itself. This is expressed by those texts that fit into the third and fourth categories listed in section 1.

First of all, Hume says that a belief is an idea that is somehow related to a certain feeling:

the difference between *fiction* and *belieflies* in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former. (E 48)

belief consists not in the nature and order of our ideas, but ... in their *feeling* to the mind. (T 629, emphasis added)

Although we have not as yet determined what Hume understands the relationship between the idea and the feeling to be, it is clear that this version of the FT holds that the specific difference of a belief-idea is how it feels to the mind. I have many ideas in my mind, but some of them have a special feeling that makes them beliefs.

On the other hand, Hume also seems to identify belief with that very belief-feeling instead of with the ideas that have that feeling: "Belief is the true and proper name of this feeling" (E 48-49). This problem is analogous to what we saw in our discussion of the MCT, and its solution is likewise analogous. Hume's FT is that beliefs are ideas that have a special belief-feeling.

5. But now we must deal with conflict between the MCT and the FT. How can belief be both an idea conceived in a certain manner and an idea that feels a certain way to the mind?

First, we could try to choose either the MCT or the FT. But choosing either to the exclusion of the other would give us no way of dealing with half of Hume's statements. He switches back and forth between his FT

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and his MCT very often, and a good interpretation should account for both.

Second, we could argue that the MCT addresses the ontic issue of what a belief is and that the FT addresses the epistemic issue of how we tell that a belief is a belief. On this reading, Hume would be saying that beliefs *are* lively ideas, but that *we recognize* them as beliefs by their belief-feeling.⁵ But distinguishing the epistemic from the ontic is just what Hume usually doesn't do. Furthermore, for Hume, only ideas that are separable can be distinguished (T 18). What makes it possible to distinguish (by a "distinction of reason") the whiteness of the globe from its sphericity, to use Hume's example, is that we can imagine both something that is white but not a sphere, and something that is a sphere but not white (T 24-25); but if, for Hume, all belief-ideas feel like belief-ideas and all ideas that feel like belief-ideas are belief-ideas, then we could never make the comparisons needed to support such an ontic-epistemic distinction. And it does seem that Hume thinks that all beliefs feel like beliefs and vice versa; the closest he comes to denying this is in T 630-32, where he discusses the ideas aroused by poetry. But even there he says that, however lively they may seem to be, they always feel different from the ideas that we really believe (cf. T 109-10). Hence it seems that, in addition to rejecting the ontic-epistemic interpretation, we must reject any interpretation that distinguishes "manner of conception" from "feeling." Any accurate interpretation must rather identify the two and thus merge the MCT with the FT.

A third interpretation, one that does identify manner of conception with feeling, is that offered by Stacy Hansen (1988) and Daniel Flage (1990).⁶ On the Hansen-Flage reading, although in the *Treatise* Hume was unclear on the nature of belief, by the time of the *Enquiry* he had come to think that to have a belief is to have an idea that is related to a certain impression of reflection; to say that a belief is an idea that is conceived in a certain manner or to say that a belief is an idea that feels a certain way is to say that it is an idea that is related to a certain kind of impression of reflection.⁷

There are important difficulties with this view, however. First (as Hansen and Flage are, of course, aware), Hume nowhere says that there is an impression of reflection that makes a belief a belief, and, more generally, Hume nowhere says that a perception's force and vivacity are to be understood as an impression of reflection. But considering the great importance of belief and of force and vivacity in Hume's system, if Hume had changed or clarified his view on these matters by developing a theory such as the one Hansen and Flage attribute to him, surely he would have discussed it explicitly and at length in the *Enquiry*, not only when discussing belief but also when

discussing the difference between impressions and ideas. But this he does not do.

The second problem with the Hansen-Flage reading is that it has little textual support. The key text is:

the difference between *fiction* and *belief* lies in some sentiment or feeling, which is annexed to the latter, not to the former. ... Whenever any object is presented to the memory or senses, it immediately, by the force of custom, carries the imagination to conceive that object, which is usually conjoined to it; and this conception is attended with a feeling or sentiment, different from the loose reveries of the fancy. (E 48)

It is true that this passage lends support to the view that there is essential to a belief-idea a feeling external to it, but it does not say that the feeling is an impression of reflection, and in any case Hume soon returns to discussing belief as if the manner of conception or feeling were internal to the belief-idea: "belief is nothing but a more vivid, lively, forcible, firm, steady conception of an object" (E 49).

Since appealing to the texts is not decisive, we would do well to ask whether the view that Hansen and Flage attribute to Hume is truly Humean. For several reasons, it seems that it is not. First, it will not do to interpret the force and vivacity of a given perception as an impression of reflection about that perception, because an impression of reflection is itself an impression (and not an idea) only by virtue of its force and vivacity. In other words, it is circular to invoke impressions to explain why impressions are impressions, ideas are ideas, and beliefs are beliefs. Second, if every perception of the mind is an impression or an idea because of some impression of reflection, then surely this applies to impressions of reflection as well, which leads to an infinite regress.⁸ Third, the Hansen-Flage view supposes that, for Hume, belief is an intentional act, taking the form of an impression of reflection that has an idea as its object. But although Hume does sometimes speak as if the idea is what is believed, more often he says that the idea *is* the belief. Fourth, for Hume, what makes a belief different from a mere conception is the same thing that makes an impression different from an idea, and even in the *Enquiry*, this is something internal to the perceptions in question (E 17-18).⁹

But how then to reconcile Hume's theories of belief? The solution offered here has two elements. First, it involves merging the MCT with the FT by identifying an idea's manner of conception with its feeling to the mind. Hume says:

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Belief is the true and proper name of this feeling. ... It may not, however, be improper to attempt a *description* of this sentiment. ... 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. (E 48-49)

Hume tells us that belief is a feeling or sentiment, and then goes on to define it as a lively idea. Another example of his identification of the two would be in the Abstract, where Hume says that "this feeling" is "a *stronger* conception" and so on (T 654); "this feeling is more firm and lively than our common conception" (T 655). And there is also his rhetorical question in the Appendix: "*Whether this feeling be any thing but a firmer conception, or a faster hold, that we take of the object?*" (T 627). Considering what we saw above when we discussed Hume's refusal to distinguish things that are necessarily found together, this identification of the two is what we would expect.

The second element of the solution being given here is to say that the feeling/manner is an internal characteristic of the belief-idea itself.¹⁰ The problems involved with making this feeling/manner external have been pointed out above.

For Hume, then, beliefs are a species of the genus of ideas, and what specifies them is neither something external to them nor something about their content. It is rather the same thing that distinguishes impressions from ideas, namely their force and vivacity, their feeling to the mind.

6. Hume says (T 86) that assent is found in the case of sensation, which means that impressions can be beliefs; but, as we have seen, in the passages where he discusses belief thematically, he says that a belief is an idea. Perhaps Hume does not bother to call impressions "beliefs" because their status seems to him unproblematic. In any case, because impressions are even higher on the manner/feeling scale than beliefs are, we can simply revise our interpretation so as to include impressions: a belief is any perception of the mind conceived with a sufficiently high degree of liveliness, which is to say, any perception that has a sufficiently lively feeling to the mind.

Does this undermine Hume's critique of religion? Hodges and Lachs have argued that if Hume says that all impressions carry belief, then he cannot criticize the beliefs of a St. Teresa who claims to have impressions of God. If, for Hume, "beliefs of maximal vivacity are uncriticizable," the belief that consists in the having of vivid mystical impressions cannot be criticized.¹¹ But Hume does not need to criticize St. Teresa's impressions as such—he just needs to reinterpret them. He can allow her to have her impressions of God just so long as she

acknowledges that what she calls 'God' is simply a subset of the bundle of impressions that make up her own mind. God is not a substance, not a person, not continuing in existence, not even external to St. Teresa. So, although her mystical experience is not criticizable, neither is it any danger to irreligion.

7. As we saw in sections 1 and 2, Hume says many other things about belief that are not directly addressed to the question of the nature of belief. He says that a belief is (5) an idea that has a great influence on the mind (e.g., T 118-20); (6) an act of mind rendering realities influential on the mind (E 49, T 629); (7) a lively idea related to an impression (e.g., T 96); (8) a lively manner of conceiving an idea, which manner arises from an impression (E 50); and (9) something that makes ideas forceful and vivacious (T 101, 627). Let us briefly examine these statements.

Concerning the statements in the ninth category, Hodges and Lachs have claimed that they represent a separate Humean theory of belief: "here belief appears to function as a dynamic agency"; they suggest that perhaps Hume is thinking of an "unobservable power" or "unobservable disposition."¹² For example, they quote Hume as follows: "belief ... modifies the idea or conception; and renders it different to the feeling" (T 627). But what belongs in the ellipsis is the word "only," and what follows is, "without producing any distinct impression." Hume is trying to point out that ideas that are beliefs are different from ideas that are not beliefs by virtue of the manner in which they are conceived and not by the addition of any distinct impression. There is no reason to suppose, here or elsewhere, that Hume is speaking of belief as if it were some mysterious agency; what is far more likely is that he wrote carelessly.

The statements belonging to categories (5) and (6) are addressed to the question of what beliefs do. In T 118, Hume notes that pleasure and pain are the "chief spring and moving principle" of all the actions of the mind. But pain and pleasure appear in the mind in two forms: either as impressions, or as ideas, and it is in the former form that they "always actuate the soul" (T 118). Ideas do not always actuate the soul, however, and this is a good thing, for if they did, we would be constantly swept back and forth by whatever came into our minds (T 118-19).

Nature has, therefore, chosen a medium, and has neither bestow'd on every idea of good and evil the power of actuating the will, nor yet has entirely excluded them from this influence. Tho' an idle fiction has no efficacy, yet we find by experience, that the ideas of those objects, which we believe either are or will be existent, produce in a lesser degree the

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same effect with those impressions, which are immediately present to the senses and perception. The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an equality with our impressions, and bestow on it a like influence on the passions. This effect it can only have by making an idea approach an impression in force and vivacity. (T 119)

For Hume, beliefs are not mere ideas; they affect the will almost as much as impressions do.¹³

What Hume is getting at seems clear. The mere idea of a tiger in the next room does not greatly affect my emotions or my actions; but if I *believed* that there were a tiger in the next room, my feelings and actions would be affected to a considerable degree. Hume's explanation of this fact is that my idea of the tiger has less force and vivacity in the one case, and more in the other. Beliefs have "more force and influence," appear "of greater importance," and are "the governing principles of all our actions" (T 629).

On the other hand, Hume also says that belief is

that act of the mind, which renders realities, or what is taken for such, more present to us than fictions, causes them to weigh more in the thought, and gives them a superior influence on the passions and imagination. (E 49; cf. T 629)

This seems inconsistent with what we have just seen: is belief an influential idea, or is it an act of the mind that renders realities influential? These two formulations point to the same fact from different perspectives. From the purely 'internal' or 'mental' perspective, beliefs are influential ideas; but when we consider the possibility that external realities have some influence on the mental world, we see that this would take place by means of the ideas that we call "beliefs"—from this perspective, beliefs are influential because they allow realities to be influential.

The statements belonging to the seventh and eighth categories concern the causes of beliefs. First let us reconcile them. Hume says that a belief is a lively idea related to a present impression, but he also says that it is a lively manner of conceiving an idea, which lively manner arises from an impression. In accordance with the interpretations given above, Hume's theory here is that a belief is an idea conceived in a certain manner (with a certain feeling to the mind), and that this manner (this feeling) is the result of the idea's relation to an impression.

Hume needs to explain why some ideas are lively enough to be beliefs, and his answer is that they are related to impressions. An

impression of wood being cast into the fire leads by custom to an idea of the wood bursting into flames; what makes the idea of the wood in flames a belief is the force and vivacity that it receives from the impression of the wood going into the fire (T 98, E 54). As Hume says, “a present impression with a relation of causation may enliven any idea, and consequently produce belief or assent” (T 101). Impressions already have maximal force and vivacity, and the ideas that are related to them have a share in that force and vivacity by virtue of that relation. That is what makes certain ideas beliefs.¹⁴

I have just argued that, for Hume, talking about the causes of belief or the effects of belief is different from talking about what belief is. But is this correct? Let us first consider the question of effects. Is it not possible that Hume means for the effects of belief to be included in its very definition? According to this objection, a sufficiently lively perception would not necessarily be a belief; only a lively perception that had certain effects would be a belief. However, it seems that Hume did not hold this. For example, in the section, “Of the influence of belief,” Hume says, “Belief, therefore, since it causes an idea to imitate the effects of the impressions, must make it resemble them in these qualities, and is nothing but *a more vivid and intense conception of any idea*” (T 119-20). Even when he is stating that a belief causes certain effects, Hume says that it is “nothing but” a vivid conception.

The parallel objection based on the causes of belief is a more difficult one. Perhaps Hume included in his definition of belief the causes of belief. Does he not tell us that, “An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin’d, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION” (T 96)? Surely, one could say, Hume is here including a causal notion in his definition of belief. If this passage is read in context, however, things are not so clear. What precedes it is Hume’s argument that ideas can differ from one another only by their content or by their manner of conception; what one expects when the definition finally comes is simply a definition of beliefs as ideas that are conceived differently from mere conceptions—Hume’s comment about the present impression receives no support from the argumentation that precedes it. In the paragraph that follows the definition, Hume argues that we must have a present impression—or a present memory—if we are to infer the existence of one object from that of another. His point is that the mere thought of a tiger will not lead me to believe that I am about to be eaten; to be led to believe this, I must (for example) see a tiger or else remember having seen a tiger. In other words, Hume is concerned to point out that beliefs do not arise out of nowhere, but out of impressions (or memories) of impressions. Then, Hume says that a belief is more than just an idea, and that the

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only way in which an idea can be modified is by an increase or decrease in force and vivacity. Finally, he concludes by repeating his definition.

All this does not support the idea that Hume includes causality in his definition of belief. On that interpretation, being a lively perception would not be sufficient for being a belief—only being a lively perception with a certain causal history would be sufficient. But Hume says again and again that the only difference between believing and merely conceiving lies in the manner of conception, and his contrast is always between ideas forcibly and ideas weakly conceived. He does not speak of ideas that are lively enough to be beliefs but that nonetheless, due to their poor pedigree, are not. The very passage in which Hume's troublesome definition appears supports this: most of the passage is devoted to arguing that the only difference between beliefs and mere conceptions is that beliefs are livelier. It seems, then, that the best interpretation is that Hume does not include causality in the very meaning of belief, and that when he seems to do so, his remarks are being infected by an alien topic, namely, where beliefs come from.

Hume's statements about belief are, for the most part, poorly framed and susceptible of much misunderstanding. However, a careful and charitable interpretation shows that, for Hume, a belief is a perception that has a certain feeling to the mind, which is the same as saying that it is a perception that is conceived in a certain manner. Furthermore, beliefs are those perceptions that most affect the will, and they are able to do this either by virtue of being impressions themselves or by virtue of their relations to the impressions or memories that give rise to them.¹⁵

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1. Among the authors who have noticed Hume's inconsistencies are Laird (1931), Maund ([1937] 1972), Pflaum (1950), Armstrong (1973), Hodges and Lachs (1976), Ayer (1980), Hansen (1988), and Flage (1990).
2. Laird (1931) and Church ([1935] 1968) say that beliefs for Hume are those ideas that fit into a stable system. Hodges and Lachs also have some categories that I do not list here.
3. Cf. Hodges and Lachs (1976) and perhaps Pflaum (1950).
4. This version of the MCT is not to be confused with what Hodges and Lachs call Hume's "liveliness *per se*" view (1976, 5-7).
5. Perhaps Butler (1976, 136) holds this view of Hume.
6. Neither Hansen nor Flage makes an issue of this identification, however.

7. Hansen (1988) is concerned mostly with the question of belief. For her, a belief involves an idea and a certain kind of impression of reflection: the impression is the belief itself, and the idea is not the belief but rather what the belief is about—it is the object of the belief-impression (p. 299). Flage (1990) is concerned with the broader question of the nature of force and vivacity, and for him a perception's force and vivacity is an impression of reflection that is related to it (pp. 181-82). It is uncertain whether for Flage a belief is the impression of reflection, the idea that the impression of reflection corresponds to, or the two of them together. MacNabb (1951) seems to think that the manner of conception is an impression of reflection, but seems not to identify this manner of conception with the belief itself: "The difference between mere conception and belief lies ... in the manner in which we conceive them. ... [T]his manner of reflection is something that can be 'felt', an impression of reflection" (p. 71).
8. Flage's solution to this problem (1990, 183-84) is unconvincing, because it requires us to treat cognitive and emotional impressions of reflection differently—this seems too *ad hoc*.
9. Cf. Stroud (1977, 70).
10. Cf. Butler (1976, 128-29, 135).
11. Hodges and Lachs (1976, 8-12).
12. *Ibid.*, 6, 14.
13. In the sense that both impressions and beliefs actuate the will, Hume can say that beliefs are raised "to an equality with our impressions," but this still allows him to note that beliefs are less powerful in this regard than are impressions.
14. There are other details to go into here; for example, the way in which impressions can cause belief indirectly by way of an idea of memory. Furthermore, there is a different sort of answer to the question, What causes beliefs? Instead of asking how ideas get to be so lively as to be beliefs, we can ask how the ideas that get to be beliefs arise at all. This brings us to Hume's thoughts on causation, which would take us too far afield for our present purposes.
15. A version of this paper was read at the 1992 meeting of the Eastern Division of the APA, and the present version has benefitted greatly by Michael Hodges's commentary at that session, for which I am very grateful. I would also like to thank Kenneth Barber and Lesley Friedman for their helpful remarks.

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