



Temple Grandin. *Thinking in Pictures*

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TEMPLE GRANDIN. *Thinking in Pictures*, Foreword by Oliver Sacks. New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1996. Pp. 222. ISBN 067977289 \$12.00 paper.

Late British Empiricism was a research project built around a two-part psychological theory: that thoughts represent their objects by qualitatively resembling them (the "Theory of Ideas") and that thought proceeds by traversing associative links between ideas ("associationism"). The work of Hume, and then of Mill, were the project's high-water marks; twentieth-century philosophers no longer find the psychology convincing. The problem, as far as the philosophers were concerned, was not so much that the account seemed false upon introspection, nor that the discipline of psychology had itself moved on, but that the psychological theory did not make good on its explanatory obligations: most importantly, a thought's being a mental picture is not a satisfactory account of why it has the content it does. But this reason for rejecting Empiricist psychology, that it could not do its assigned philosophical job, leaves open the possibility of minds for which it is nonetheless a satisfactory description.

Grandin's contribution to the emerging genre of autobiography by high-functioning autistics will interest contemporary Humeans, because it is a window into a mind of which Hume's psychology is for the most part true. As her title suggests, Grandin's thoughts consist of images; words, she says, are like a second language to her. The segue from image to image is associative, and so the puzzles of empiricist theory—how to reconstruct this or that kind of thought, using only associations between images—are for Grandin practical problems. Recall Hume's attempt on the theoretical problem of making mental pictures of particulars do duty for abstract concepts (T 17–24); here is Grandin facing the same difficulty. I quote an example at length to give the flavor of her writing:

Spatial words such as "over" and "under" had no meaning for me until I had a visual image to fix them in my memory. Even now, when I hear the word "under" by itself, I automatically picture myself getting under the cafeteria tables at school during an air-raid drill, a common occurrence on the East Coast during the early fifties. The first memory that any single word triggers is almost always a childhood memory. I can remember the teacher telling us to be quiet and walking single-file into the cafeteria, where six or eight children huddled under each table. If I continue on the same train of thought, more and more associative memories of elementary school emerge. I can remember the teacher scolding me after I hit Alfred for putting dirt on

my shoe. All of these memories play like videotapes in the VCR of my imagination. If I allow my mind to keep associating, it will wander a million miles away from the word “under”, to submarines under the Antarctic and the Beatles song “Yellow Submarine”. If I let my mind pause on the picture of the yellow submarine, I then hear the song. As I start humming the song and get to the part about people coming on board, my association switches to the gangway of a ship I saw in Australia (30).

The effect of an abstract concept must be managed by surveying fully particular images, and in an associationist mind, associated but irrelevant images tend to—in Hume’s phrase—“immediately crowd in upon us”: thinking abstractly in this way is more difficult than Hume seems to realize. (Notice, however, the Kantian “I” in Grandin’s description, apparently able to intervene to control the flow of associations. While the mind we are seeing is predominantly Humean, it may not be entirely so.)

Like many persons with autism, Grandin has difficulty understanding ordinary emotional and social life, and David Owen has taken her to show “what people might be like, and what they would lack, if they were instantiations of pure Humean reason . . .”¹ Grandin’s own account suggests that Owen is off-base here: she experiences Humean passions, and her ability empathically to understand the feelings of animals is in part responsible for her success in designing livestock handling facilities. Grandin is not merely the side of the Humean mind depicted in Book I of the *Treatise*.² If she has difficulty following the passions of minds less Humean than her own, that may simply reflect the shortcomings of a Humean reliance on sympathy when faced with creatures—in this case, Grandin’s fellow humans—whose emotional and cognitive constitution is strikingly different from one’s own.

Candace Vogler has remarked that writing on moral psychology all too often turns out to be autobiography of the moral psychologist, and one might in this vein have wondered whether Hume was actually describing his own rather idiosyncratic mind from the inside. Grandin’s writing convincingly disposes of this hypothesis. Prose produced by a Humean mind turns out to have a signature style. Like her thoughts, Grandin’s book slides from topic to associated topic within the space of adjacent sentences, or even within a sentence. Because writing that follows trains of association tends to move in circles, the book repeats itself again and again. Hume’s account was evidently theory-rather than experience-driven, and he was, it now appears, inadvertently describing not his own experience, and not human mentation in general, but a certain type of autism.

Empiricist reconstructions of contents don’t always pan out. “When I am unable to convert text to pictures,” Grandin says, “it is usually because the text has no concrete meaning. Some philosophy books and articles about cattle

futures are simply incomprehensible" (31). In such cases, confidence in one's theory can give rise to the hard-headed dismissiveness characteristic both of British Empiricism and its logical positivist successors. Living in a predominantly nonautistic world, Grandin does not have the option of taking her way of thinking to be the only one possible; this is perhaps why she, unlike Hume, does not insist on consigning the philosophy, along with the cattle futures, to the flames.

NOTES

This review, when originally printed in the November 1998 issue, contained a number of errors and omitted the reviewer's notes. The editors regret the errors, and reprint a corrected version here.

1. David Owen, "Reason, Reflection, and *Reductios*", *Hume Studies* 20.2 (November 1994): 195–210. He was drawing on an article originally published in the *New Yorker* and since reprinted as the title piece of Oliver Sacks, *An Anthropologist on Mars* (New York: Vintage/Random House, 1995).

2. I take it that this is what Owen has in mind by 'Humean reason', and not the calculating instrumentalism that philosophers usually mean by that phrase.

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