'Every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea' (Treatise, Book I, Part I, Section I). What defence does Hume give of this principle and what use does he make of it?

This question asks us to explain and evaluate Hume’s defence and use of his Correspondence Theory\(^1\). In order to understand the terms Hume uses, and to present his reasons for espousing this principle, we need some preliminary discussion of Hume’s Theory of Ideas.

This essay is greatly indebted to the works listed in the Bibliography. The relevant Humean texts are Treatise, 1.1.(i)-(iv) and Enquiry, (i)-(iii).

**Hume’s Theory of Ideas**

Hume takes much of his theory of ideas from Locke, though correcting some of Locke’s terminology. Hume agrees with Locke that the mind is originally “white paper”, devoid of ideas, and that all its materials come only from experience. Hume calls all the “objects of the mind” *perceptions* and agrees with Locke that there must be a perception actually before the mind for mental phenomena to occur. To avoid circularity, the ultimate source of everything in the mind must be other than thought or reasoning, and Hume identifies it as perceiving, sensing or feeling.

Hume doesn’t think Locke’s use of the term *idea* to cover everything before the mind adequately distinguishes *sensation* from *thought*. So, Hume uses the term *impression* for *sensations* (the entities involved in feeling or experiencing, which encompass all sensations, passions and emotions) and restricts the term *idea* to *thoughts* (those used in thinking or reasoning). There are two types of ideas, those of sensation & those of reflection. Hume has a fourfold division of perceptions into impressions of sensation (eg. pains), impressions of reflection (eg. fear), ideas of sensation (eg. the thought of a pain) and ideas of reflection (eg. the thought of fear).

For Hume, impressions are distinguished from ideas solely by the degree of force and liveliness with which they strike the mind. Impressions and ideas differ in degree, not in kind. Impressions enter our consciousness with the most force or violence. Ideas are the faint images of impressions used in thought and reasoning. The metaphor of “vivacity” doesn’t explain the difference, but Hume doesn’t think the distinction requires much explanation since everyone knows by introspection the difference between feeling and thinking. The distinction between impressions and ideas is that between actually perceiving something and just thinking about it in its absence. Sensory perception and thought differ only in being transactions with entities that differ qualitatively in vivacity. Vivacity is purely phenomenological.

Hume, like Locke, divides perceptions into *simple* and *complex*. Complex perceptions are those that can be distinguished into parts; simple perceptions are those that cannot. The

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\(^1\) Otherwise known as his Copy Principle.
colour, taste and smell of an apple, though bound together in it, are distinguishable. Hence, both an impression of an apple and an idea of an apple are complex perceptions since they consist in distinguishable parts.

Simple ideas are the residue left when phenomenological division, equivalent to logical analysis, stops. We can generate many new ideas from a single complex idea by analysis, so bringing before the mind more clearly one of the simple ideas out of which the complex idea is composed.

**The Correspondence Theory**

At first thought, all our perceptions are double, appearing both as impressions and ideas, which differ only in the liveliness with which they strike the mind. Hume gives an example of his room, with the details as perceived (*impressions*) and remembered (*ideas*) exactly corresponding.

However, we have counter-examples in both directions to this notion of universal correspondence. The idea of the New Jerusalem was never an impression and I can never have an adequate idea of the impression of Paris.

So, Hume does not imagine that the correspondence theory holds for *every* idea and impression, but only in the restricted domain of *simple* ideas and impressions.

Complex perceptions are made up of simples alone and we can deliberately synthesize a complex idea by combining simple ideas, as when we use our imagination. So, for Hume, everything in the mind either is a simple impression, is compounded of simple impressions, or arises from simple impressions via the corresponding simple ideas.

**Two-way Correspondence**

Hume’s *first principle in the science of human nature* is “that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent”. However, the quotation in our question is taken from a couple of paragraphs earlier in *Treatise* 1.1.(i). Hume’s focus is on the first half of the quotation in our question. Hume doesn’t attempt to demonstrate the second half, but he does seem to consider it true because he mentions it on a number of occasions.

Hume’s focus is to demonstrate that there’s nothing in the mind other than what can be traced back to the senses. Pears (p.18) notes that the fact (if it is one) that every impression has an idea that resembles it plays no important role in Hume’s system. It’s not critical to his argument that there may be simple impressions we’ve never reflected on, and therefore have no simple idea of. Pears (p.11) suggests that Hume felt no need to duplicate impressions with ideas until these are required from memory. Two-way correspondence may be an over-zealous claim for the sake of tidiness. When I look at a complex scene, I may not notice all the simple impressions it contains so that I don’t reflect on them as simple ideas. So, I may have encountered simple impressions of which
I’ve never formed an idea. However, Hume would insist that that I could form a simple idea corresponding to any simple impression if the occasion demanded. This is the substance of his challenge to the reader (*Treatise*, p.51) “to show a simple impression that has not a correspondent idea”.

**Hume’s Defence of the Correspondence Theory**

Hume doesn’t really argue for correspondence between simple ideas and impressions. Rather, he thinks that an inspection of the mind shows that there is a one-one correspondence. Instead of attempting a proof via the impossible task of inspecting every simple impression and idea, which in any case are private to each mind, Hume resorts to his standard ploy of challenging those who think otherwise to come up with a counterexample. Hume does, however, offer certain phenomena in support.

Firstly, those who happen not to have had the relevant impressions lack the corresponding ideas. No one can know what a pineapple truly tastes like unless he’s tasted one. Children acquire the ideas of colours and tastes by being presented with objects with these qualities; it is absurd to think that the impression could first arise from the idea, and that we could sensibly ask the child to imagine something sweet without having first tasted sweet things. In particular, people born deaf or blind not only lack the impressions but the ideas of colour or sound.

Secondly, Hume notes the constant conjunction of corresponding ideas and impressions. Hume argues that this cannot be due to chance, since it is so universal, but must indicate a causal connection between simple impressions and ideas. Either impressions cause their correlated ideas, or vice-versa. Hume argues that impressions cause ideas because we know from experience that simple impressions always precede the corresponding simple idea. He takes his theory to be an empirical discovery. Ideas are only contingently derived from impressions. This may motivate Hume’s two-way correspondence theory.

**Hume’s Use of the Correspondence Theory**

Hume’s theory of ideas, and hence the correspondence theory, forms the foundation on which Hume builds his science of the mind. However, Hume also uses the correspondence theory polemically in disputes with his Rationalist opponents.

Firstly, it should settle, in the negative, the question of innate ideas.

Secondly, he uses it against philosophical notions such as *substance* and *necessary connection*. Hume argues that such terms are altogether insignificant. An “idea” not derived from impressions (whether directly, or indirectly by construction out of simple ideas themselves acquired directly from simple impressions) is spurious, one that we cannot really have.

**Objections to Hume’s Correspondence Theory**
Distinguishing Ideas from Impressions

Hume's theory comes under pressure when we ask how we recognise impressions. Hume requires us to produce sensory impressions to justify our ideas, so we must be able to recognise impressions and be sure they entered by the senses. Hume thinks he knows by introspection that simple impressions are always temporally prior to their corresponding ideas, and that he can recognise impressions by the greater liveliness with which they strike the mind. This allows him to observe the constant conjunction of greater liveliness and earlier appearance required by his causal theory. However, there are counter-examples.

Noonan (p.66) remarks that Hume has a problem where violent ideas (such as those encountered in sleep, fever or madness) approach or exceed impressions in vivacity. His official view, that ideas and impressions differ only in vivacity, ought to have made him accept that impressions are before the mind under such conditions, but he refuses to do so and inconsistently equates impressions with veridical perceptual states.

Additionally, ideas can sometimes seem to have richer contents than impressions, as when we become aware in recollection of something we didn’t notice at the time. Stroud (pp.28-9) gives an example. A detective remembers a murder-scene and, on reflection, sees a significant clue (that the poker was on the left of the fireplace whereas the victim was right-handed, showing that a left-handed person had been in the room). This causes part of the visual image of the room presented by his memory as an idea to appear much livelier than the original impression had been (where he’d hardly noticed the position of the poker).

Hume can always brazen out these examples. He claims that lively ideas only approach impressions in vivacity. While we are surprised by the liveliness of dreams and memories, they are not quite as lively as veridical perception.

The Missing Shade of Blue

Having sketched his theory of ideas and established his Copy Principle to his satisfaction, Hume immediately rises to his own challenge and raises his own objection. Someone is presented with the spectrum of all the shades of blue, but missing one that, as it happens, he has never actually seen. Hume thinks it possible for him to acquire an idea of the missing shade even though he has never had the corresponding impression.

Hume admits this as a genuine counter-example, but denies that it justifies the rejection of his Copy Principle. This response is puzzling. Why, if an exception is found, should we not abandon or alter a maxim? Hume sees no reason why the “missing shade of blue” situation shouldn’t occur in real life - it's not just a bare possibility. But, if we can form an idea of the “missing shade of blue” without a corresponding impression, why not the idea of substance? Hume's response is that this example is so “particular and singular” that it doesn’t infect the rest of his theory; it is a one-off that can be ignored. Rationalists will find this far from convincing.
There are several suggestions for rescuing Hume, which are of variable promise.

Noonan (p.67) suggests a non-genetic and non-causal form of empiricism. One can only express in language those features of the world that are capable of being encountered in experience. The missing shade of blue is capable of being encountered in experience (and has been encountered by others), but substance and necessary connection are not. Impressions of these concepts are impossible. Hume can continue with the polemical use of his Copy Principle, because it’s only the genetic form, not the content, that’s refuted by the missing shade of blue.

Stroud (p.34) thinks we can understand Hume’s acceptance of the counter-example by remembering that he put forward his maxim as a straightforward causal hypothesis that is only contingently true and might even be found to be false. Exceptions might be accommodated without having to invoke principles inimical to his theory of mind. For, if they are very rare, they could be ignored much as the good general maxim that water boils at 100°C is accepted despite the fact that this is not true on the top of mountains. However, he admits that this is still unsettling because we don’t know how far the exceptions might spread.

Pears (p.22) rightly picks up on Stroud’s disquiet because of Hume’s polemical use of his maxim. Hume wants to claim that we can’t form ideas of, say, causal power as an exception. Why not, if we can exceptionally form ideas of missing shades of blue?

Pears’s (p.24) favoured solution is to propose a third way of deriving ideas from impressions, namely laterally from other ideas in its group. This still derives ideas from impressions, but by a less direct route. It points out the distinction between atomism and holism. Hume looked for intrinsic features of complex ideas and broke them down by analysis. This drives Hume to atomism, which makes him neglect lateral connections, as in the colour-circle. A more holistic approach would recognise extrinsic as well as intrinsic connections. The missing shade of blue is an instance of the central problem of atomism, which has to be abandoned if we adopt Pears’s suggested solution. Empiricism survives, however.

Noonan (p.68-9) also supports this proposal. Hume later allowed that simple impressions are comparable – that blue is closer to green than it is to scarlet. Consequently, simple impressions can be arranged in sequence and missing items interpolated. So, the missing shade of blue is a counter-example to the Copy Principle, but not to Noonan’s suggested weaker principle “any simple idea is either a copy of the corresponding impression or an idea produced in the mind by contiguous degrees of the corresponding quality”. All simple ideas still have to be produced in the mind ultimately depending on simple impressions, but this doesn’t require exact correspondence.

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2 Appendix to the Treatise (inserted as a footnote on p.67).
However, philosophical concepts like substance and necessary connection can’t be lined up in a row with degrees of the quality. Maybe some things are more truly substances than others, but the concept of substance isn’t, as Noonan points out, “a concept of a determinate degree of some determinable quality”. Hence, these concepts are not on a par with the missing shade of blue, and Hume can continue the polemical use his Copy Principle in rejecting such concepts.

**Conclusion**

We have seen how Hume derives his Copy Principle from psychological introspection and how he can defend it against detractors. His main use of the Principle is in rejecting innate ideas and dubious philosophical terms. There are several defences against the classic objection, raised by Hume himself, of the missing shade of blue. These, where successful, demand more concessions than Hume might have been willing to make, in abandoning his atomism, but retain his empiricism.

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3 Word count 2,600, including Bibliography (94), Title (40) & this footnote (14) = 148.