



Hume and the Enlightenment

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Triggers of Thought Impressions within Hume's Theory of Mind

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The essay is an attempt to cast new light on Hume's understanding of impressions within processes of thought formation. By exploring Reid's understanding of sensations as signs I will argue that Humean impressions can be identified as triggers of associative processes which enable us to think about the world in relation to our experiences with it. This will lead us to an understanding that it is the regularity with which certain kinds of sensory inputs are thought to motivate certain sets of complex ideas that distinguishes 'fictitious' ideas from 'real' ideas. The traditional perspective emphasising the importance of the copy-principle will thus be challenged, for I will argue that it is not so much a question of correspondence and the fact that something is perceivable that matter within Hume's account of what constitutes acceptable ideas, but the naturalness and regularity of the processes that underlie their formation. The suggested reading reinforces the classification of Hume as a philosopher of the enlightenment who rejects dogmatism and metaphysical speculation: one's own experience remains to be seen as the recommended starting point for the formation of legitimate thought. What is more, however, the re-interpretation of impressions as triggers of thought provides an answer to the standing question of how it is possible for Hume to argue from sceptical principles, i.e. from principles that deny that experience can give us a true account of how things stand, without abandoning the normative claim that experience is to govern processes of idea formation.