

Discussion: Hume's Criticisms of Abstract Ideas

Purpose: There are two goals of this group assignment. First, students will learn how to reconstruct philosophical arguments. Second, students will learn about Hume's criticisms of Locke's theory of abstract ideas.

Directions: In section I.1.7 of [Hume, 2003], Hume advances at least three arguments that abstract ideas cannot be formed. I have cited (parts of) three passages below. In groups of 6-7 students, reconstruct one of Hume's arguments. I will assign you an argument.

Reconstructing Arguments

Reconstructing an argument involves six steps:

1. Copy all the assumptions and conclusions. Label
 - (a) Which assertions are assumptions and which are conclusions.
 - (b) Of which premises each conclusion is purportedly a consequence
2. Copy the author's definitions of all technical terms. If the author does not define key terms, copy all passages in which the author explains or gives examples of key terms.
3. Rewrite all definitions, assumptions, and conclusions in your own words.
4. Add plausible premises to render the argument valid. Similarly, explain critical terms that the author seems to have left undefined.
5. Provide textual evidence that supports your hypothesis that the author likely endorsed the premises and definitions you have added.
6. If appropriate, repeat the above five steps if the author provides arguments with conclusions that are identical to the premises of the argument that you have just reconstructed.

Hume's Arguments

Argument 1:

[W]hatever objects are separable [by the thought and imagination] are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable, are also different. . . . But 'tis evident at first sight, that the precise length of a line is not different nor distinguishable from the line itself. nor the precise degree of any quality from the quality. These ideas, therefore, admit no more of separation than they do of distinction and difference.

Argument 2:

Now since all ideas are deriv'd from impressions, and are nothing but copies and representations of them, whatever is true of the one must be acknowledg'd concerning the other . . . An idea is a weaker impression, and as a strong impression must necessarily have a determinate quantity and quality, the case must be the same with its copy or representative.

Argument 3:

Thirdly, 'tis a principle generally receiv'd in philosophy that everything in nature is individual, and that 'tis utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles. If this therefore be absurd in fact and reality, it must also be absurd in idea; since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. But to form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simply, is the same thing; the reference of the idea to an object being an extraneous denomination, of which in itself it bears no mark or character. Now as 'tis impossible to form an idea of an object, that is possess of quantity and quality, and yet is possess of no precise degree of either; it follows that there is an equal impossibility of forming an idea, that is not limited and confin'd in both these particulars.

References

David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Courier Dover Publications, 2003.