

David Hume: Epistemology

Part 2: Association of Ideas & The Empirical Criterion of Meaning

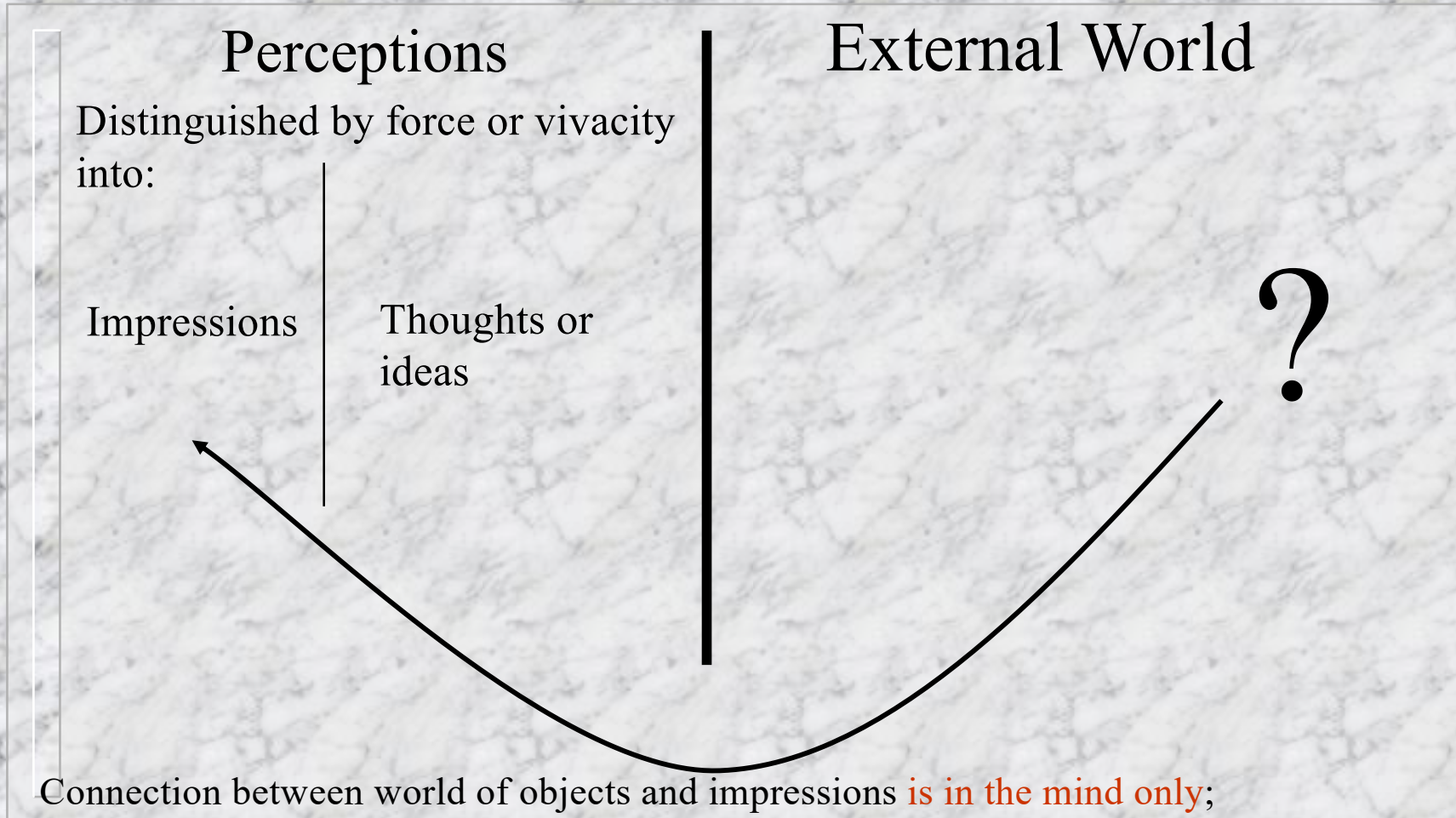
Association of Ideas

- Since, according to Hume, every simple idea is an **independent entity**, it is theoretically possible that any of our simple ideas **might precede or follow** any other simple idea, in any order whatever
- But observing the actual flow of ideas in our minds indicates this is not the case
- Our ideas seem to fall into regular patterns, and the relations don't seem to be merely random
- Hume reasoned that there must be “some universal principles” at work among our ideas, some “bond of union among them, some association quality by which one idea naturally introduces another”

Association of Ideas

- “Some **bond of union** among them, like some **associating quality**, by which one ideas naturally introduces another”; he thought of 3 principles:
 - Resemblance
 - Contiguity
 - Cause and Effect

Hume's Epistemology (so far)



Connection between world of objects and impressions **is in the mind only**;
sense of material objects are “formed” by the mind’s **structuring activities**: 1) resemblance
2) contiguity, and 3) cause and effect

Association

- It appears that Hume was convinced that each of these suggestions were correct, but was not sure they were exhaustive of the possible principles that serve to “connect ideas”
- Hume thought these effects (these idea connections of the mind) are “every where conspicuous, but as to its causes, they are mostly unknown and must be resolv’d **into original qualities of human nature**, which I pretend not to explain. . . .”

Association

- “Amongst the effects of this union or association of ideas, there are none more remarkable than those **complex ideas**, which are the common subjects of our thoughts and reasoning, and generally arise from some principle of union among our simple ideas”

Association

- The previous quote is a bit difficult to explain, but it goes something like this:
 - **Complex ideas** originate in our minds as a result of resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect
 - What generates complex ideas that Hume classified as “abstract”—like “triangle” or “justice”?
 - Hume would answer the principle of resemblance

Association

- Hume's account of how abstract ideas are formed in the mind:
 - “When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them”
 - Note this sounds like nominalism—no universals or abstract objects exist other than in the mind
 - We apply these names despite subtle differences between particulars of these types
 - We acquire a “custom” of doing this
 - This custom doesn't revive all of the individuals examples; rather it “touches the soul” and sort of awakens the sense we acquired by surveying different, by similar examples and calling them a general name
 - All simple ideas are memory copies of simple impressions; complex ideas are combinations of simple ones

Association

- “’tis certain *that* we form the idea of individuals, whenever we use any general terms; *that* we seldom or never can exhaust these individuals; and *that* those, which remain are only represented by means of that habit by which we recall them, whenever any present occasion requires it.”

The Empirical Criterion of Meaning

- Hume's view of how abstract ideas are formed shapes his view of meaning
- A term has meaning (that is, names an idea) only if there is an impression or combination of impressions of which it is a copy
- Nominalism was the result of this criterion of meaning and the psychological doctrine that impressions are “particular in their nature and at the same time finite in their number”



The Empirical Criterion of Meaning

- This is because there could be no “real” universals
- Hume would say, show me a universal and I will believe it when you point it out to me, but you never *show me more than* 1) a term, 2) a number of particulars, or 3) a habit

The Empirical Criterion of Meaning

- Hume's epistemic theory is of great importance because he was
 - Thorough in developing the implications of his empirical and nominalistic starting point
 - To deny his conclusions, there must be something wrong with these starting points and with his conception of mind as a collection of simple impressions and ideas

The Empirical Criterion of Meaning

- If Hume was correct, than much of traditional philosophy was not merely false, but also non-sense
- So Hume was applying a more consistent view than Locke or Berkeley in that they allowed themselves, inconsistently, all sorts of **universals, as well as spiritual activities and causes**

The Empirical Criterion of Meaning

- So, now the question is how would Hume's version of the empirical criterion of meaning be applied to the analysis of some of the great traditional concepts of philosophy like substance, the self, and identity?