

Edith Stein's Critique of Hume's Association Theory¹

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Abstract: Stein's engagement with the thought of David Hume (1711-1776) is a rare instance of common ground between the Continental and the Anglo-American traditions in philosophy. It brings us into Stein's thought by a gentle slope, bypassing the mountain ranges of Husserl, Scheler, and Heidegger. In her 1922 treatise on 'Sentient Causality,' Stein cites Hume's 1740 *Treatise of Human Nature* for two purposes. First, his well-known terminology and his empirical account of mental processes help her to clarify her own terms, and to set forth her position. These parallels between Hume's and Stein's thought will be my point of departure. Second, Stein goes on to discover the deficiency of Hume's thought, and then to propose a more adequate science of human sentience. This work of critique and construction on Stein's part is the major focus of my paper.

1. Comparison of terms and concerns in Hume and Stein

Stein concurs with Hume in several ambitions. Like him, she wants to deflate the dogmatic pretensions of philosophy and to place science on a solid footing. Like him, she proposes to do so by clarifying the causal relationship while maintaining the immediacy of lived experience as the root of cognitive process. Stein affirms Hume's distinction between 'ideas' and 'impressions' as two kinds of thoughts - 'perceptions,' as he calls them. What distinguishes 'impressions' from 'ideas' is their vividness, or liveliness. The 'ideas,' by Hume's account, are mere copies representing the content of impressions once they have lost their liveliness.

Hume's paradigm example of 'impression' is sensation: i.e. our reception of the sights and sounds of everyday life. These 'impressions' beget images of themselves, ideas, which may be thought after the sensation itself has died away. Thus impressions

are the source of ideas. Impressions can also generate further impressions, for example when one emotion arouses another. 'Impressions of reflection' may arise from ideas but only as a re-kindling of their original lively impressions. For Hume, ideas do not give rise to impressions of sensation.

Stein dissents on this last point, for obviously we do indeed at times experience visceral responses to ideas for which we had no original impression; for example, to news or stories or deductions or suspicions. Therefore Stein makes two modifications in Hume's basic account. She transposes Hume's distinction between the vivid and non-vivid perceptions into the content of experience. Some experiences, or chains of experiences, are such that their flow can be lived by a human being. These include pleasure, pain, decision-making, creative expression, and so forth. Other experiences, or chains of experiences, are such that their flow cannot be lived by a human being, but merely observed. These include mechanical and chemical processes. Now both sorts of content, the liveable and the merely observable, are entertained in thoughts that are alive as we are thinking them (SC 100²). Within this 'aliveness' of thought, we are poised to flow forward either into a kindling (or re-kindling) of liveable experiences, or, into a further observation of physical processes, as the case may be.

From this arises Stein's second modification of Hume's account of perceptions. Those 'ideas' and 'impressions' register in different regions of the human being, she says. Those regions are mind and sentience, respectively. Although the realm of mind is distinct from the realm of sentience, in Stein's estimation, these regions interface in complex and describable ways. Hume's 'impressions' beget 'ideas' precisely by crossing the threshold between sentience and mind. Ideas beget further ideas within the realm of the mental; and when ideas give rise to 'impressions' this occurs again across the threshold of mind and sentience. We see here that Stein is giving herself more room to work on the problems of cognitive process, which include the flowing forward of our thoughts, the returning of memories and the leaps of imagination. Like Hume (T 283³), she insists that thought cannot stand still, but must move and must do so in rule-governed ways. Those rules, for Hume, are the principles of association. This is what Stein targets in her critique.

2. Stein's arguments against Hume's theory of association

First she accuses Hume of 'a sceptical contradiction in his method, which unravelled the concept of cause on the basis of a causal consideration' (SC 3-4). This refers to Hume's claim that we do not observe causality, that is, receive an impression of it, but rather we infer it as a relation between ideas. It is true that Hume often makes causal claims in his arguments. (For example, impressions are causes of ideas, T 5; impressions arise from unknown causes, T 7.) If Hume had at the same time denied the reality or the possibility of causality, he would be vulnerable to Stein's charge of question-begging. In fact, Hume has not denied causality altogether. He has merely reclassified the epistemological status of our knowledge of causes. The idea of causality, he says, is itself caused by 'a gentle force' arising in the imagination to associate two ideas whose relation is that of cause and effect (T 10-11). This seems to move the mechanical clockwork into the mind; so that Hume's arguments deny only that causality is 'out there', leaving it to be tripped over in your back yard. The brute causality at work in the material world is now displaced by causally driven association; the motor running mental life.

There is, however, a more subtle kind of question-begging in Hume's account of association. It has to do with the discrete units of impressions and ideas. How is it that we distinguish one idea from the next, how do we know where one stops and another begins? How do we recognise a cause-effect pair, rather than a unity? Hume does not say. Although he insists on the constant flow of mental processes, he still accepts an atomised and segmented view of experiences, impressions, and ideas. The 'relations' that obtain among ideas - resemblance, contiguity, and causality - are conceivable only if ideas can be known originally as discrete units. In other words, the problem of 'associating' these discrete ideas is generated by an unacknowledged and unwarranted prior operation: that of dissociating the mental flow into discrete ideas⁴.

Stein rejects the covert atomisation of impressions and ideas, asserting that the flow of experience constitutes units. The various phases of an experience originally form a whole, a whole sense. This is why the experience tends to return as a whole, whenever a part of it is somehow recalled. One may call this process 'association' but it is by no means a causal process (SC 13-14, 103, 108). Strictly speaking, there is no 'connection between' the 'associated' elements, for they already comprise a unity of meaning; a meant unity. Stein writes: '[I]t is the essence of consciousness and of sensate life to be a steady streaming or progressing, and . . . this ordinary flux is constitutive for the enduring units of experience without which it makes no sense to talk about any "linking" at all' (SC 99). Thus association cannot be invoked to account for the steady progressing of conscious life.

This much could be said by any phenomenologist. But Stein pursues Hume's argument further. She remarks that association theory is supposed to account not only for the forward flow of experience in general, but also for the determination of each new experience. In Stein's formulation: 'How does it happen that experience B, and no other, follows right after experience A?' (SC 98). What she is criticising here is not so much Hume's own work, but applications of it in the empirical psychology of her day. Stein reasons: If association were a causal process, as empiricists assume, then stimulus A would invariably evoke response B, necessarily, as long as all other causal influences were held equal. But this does not happen in human life. Why not?

Stein says this anomaly arises because Hume has misdescribed the mechanics of associative retrieval of ideas and of impressions of reflection. He errs in overlooking the idea of liveliness itself, which arises from every experience while it is underway - from ideas and impressions alike. The idea of liveliness thus cannot be the defining characteristic of impressions, but rather is a component that can be added to or subtracted from other ideas, that is, be either joined with or missing from the sense content of any experience whatsoever. For example, we can remember an occasion on which we were angry, and the idea of that anger will include the idea that it was an active living visceral experience, whether or not the memory triggers a re-activation of living anger.

Hume's distinction between simple and complex perceptions is correct but has been misapplied. Impressions are not simple; impressions such as anger, red, or doubleness are complex as impressions, and do not become sorted into their simple components until they turn into ideas: for example, the notion of red plus the notion of myself livingly seeing red; the notion of liveable anger plus the notion of myself feeling this anger. This is why the anger that may re-ignite today will be experienced as a re-igniting, not as a new anger (SC 100).

Once it is seen that liveness-in-general and livedness-by-myself are both detachable components that may (or, may not) be ideationally combined with various other meanings, Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas becomes difficult to maintain. So-called impressions, as for example anger, are quite like mental enactments, such as, say, geometric proofs. For each of them it is true that there is a first-time realisation, a repeated realisation, a distinctive sense that can be referred back to for comparison with similar experiences, and an availability of that sense for subsequent objective recall without the original live intensity (SC 101-2). Hume's distinction between impressions and ideas now seems spurious indeed. Both, Humean ideas and Humean impressions, are equally alive while transpiring, and both gather their identity from a sense-content, a meaning. Sense belongs to sentience no less than to mind.

Now in the midst of this criticism, Stein commends association theory for its effort to portray the mind as more than a crate full of ideas, and she concedes that the problem of retrieval is difficult indeed (SC 104). This problem is really two problems: (1) How does a meaning persist when we are not actively conscious of it, and (2) What sorts of connections among meanings are there, apart from association (which she has discredited) (SC 104). As for (1), the persistence of meaning, it seems to me that Stein gives no satisfactory account. She says that the meaning is a 'residue' lingering or 'slumbering' within the current experience; nevertheless it must be living because it can alter or deepen over time (SC 108-9). As for (2), connections among meanings, it seems to me that Stein is content to have shifted the problem of connection into the realm of meaning. Or rather, she says that

Hume had covertly placed it there all along. Resemblance is always resemblance of meaning.

— Even emotions are linked by their meanings, she says, and not by any mechanical or physiological process. Hume had suggested, in a passage quoted by Stein, that anger becomes envy, envy becomes malice, and so on, simply because these feelings resemble one another (SC 112). One emotion, as an impression, simply produces the next, as another impression. Stein objects that this production is in no way automatic. Envy follows anger often but not always. This indicates that anger as such does not generate envy; rather, each feeling arises from a meaning. Perhaps the unfelt meanings give rise to each other in sequence in the mind; but the arising within sentience of an appropriate live feeling from each meaning is a further act that may or may not occur. It can happen, that in a given instance I have reason to be angry and become angry; and then the reason for anger gives rise to a reason for envy, and I become envious. Then that reason for envy gives rise to a reason for malice, but I hold back and do not become malicious. In other words, the process is not automatic, so it must be articulated into complex discretionary steps. But each of these emotions is freshly motivated from the meaning conceived, not causally produced from the preceding emotion.

To sum up Stein has re-framed the basic problem of causation to which association supposedly was the solution. The customary but misguided deterministic formulation of the problem is this: 'How does it happen that experience B, and no other, follows right after experience A?' (SC 98). Stein has argued that in fact 'experience B' is always only partially determined. That is, even with full knowledge of all preceding experiences, we can make only a good guess about someone's thoughts, feelings, and actions in the present moment. But the partiality of this determination itself leads into the two problems that Stein addresses in the constructive moments of her psychology. How come we can guess so accurately what someone will do or feel, and how come we can still be surprised? With this, I come to the third part of my paper.

3. Stein's constructive alternative to Humean association

Briefly stated, we so often guess right because we understand the rational linkages of meanings (termed 'motivation' by the phenomenologists). Meanings and motivations can be shared. Motivation is part of what partly determines human experience, by presenting the rational choices. The other part of what partly determines human experience is a kind of causality - sentient causality - that operates completely aside from the associational causality that Hume described. In addition, each actor has access to personal resources of willing that enable him or her, for example, to decline to act maliciously when there is very good reason to be malicious. And all of this can be scientifically described and applied in those practical fields that now rely on flawed deterministic psychological theory. Stein takes the rest of her book to work this out; I can offer only the barest sketch.

Earlier I said that Stein distinguishes between sentience and mind as phenomenal realms. We can take this distinction to be a correction of Hume's theory of the two kinds of perceptions - his 'impressions' and 'ideas' - for just the reasons that I have discussed. Where Hume posited 'gentle forces' producing ideas out of impressions and impressions of reflection out of ideas, Stein describes an interface between these two living realms, sentience and mind. Influences cross the threshold in either direction. In fact, Stein describes the interface of sentience and mind in terms of energy transfer. At the mind-sentience threshold, meaning converts into lifepower and lifepower into meaning. Sentience runs on lifepower. Meanings can either charge up or deplete the reservoir of lifepower, from the side of mind.

But sentience has another interface: its interface with the physical world, which also fortifies or depletes its supply of lifepower - for example, when the organism is hungry or tired. Influences pass from the physiological level into sentience and on into mind. (One thinks well when one has dined well, as Virginia Woolf remarked; but it's also true that some thoughts can upset your stomach.) These exchanges and expenditures of lifepower are the evidence that Stein cites in arguing for the reality of sentient causality. This causality operates with necessity and so is capable

of scientific description and prediction. This causality presents as a real-world phenomenon, a lively and lived causality. Where Hume cannot say how impressions are caused, much less why similar events may not cause similar impressions, Stein describes the organism's contribution to perceptions. She can tell you why I like to have my hair stroked for five minutes but not for five hours; or why I like to have my hair stroked by my husband but not by my cat; or why I cannot write philosophy when my husband is stroking my hair; or why when I have writer's block, a few moments of affectionate contact with my husband can revive my intellectual creativity. Here is the phenomenon of causality that eluded Hume, the causality that makes an 'impression.'

Sentient causality plus motivation still do not entirely determine human experience. Motivation, as we have seen, is the warranting of one idea by another. Motivation differs from causality in several ways. A motive is a state of affairs that does not yet exist in time prior to the action that it motivates. Or more precisely, only the idea of that desirable and motivating state of affairs exists prior to the decision to act so as to realise it. Causes, of course, must precede their effects. Second, an idea motivates not just one but a range of rational acts, offering a choice. Each cause, of course, must have one and only one effect. Third and most important, motivation is a process that is lived, whereas causality is entirely external to the mind and is observed from without.

Yet we do know causality, Stein says. We know it in the flux of lifepower available for the forward flow of experience and for the operation of the mind-sentience interface as a transformer of meaning into power. We also know causality by our own exchanges with the physical world, because of the permeable threshold between its causal nexus and our own sentience. Sentience, recall, is permeable also to meanings and is governed by a law of conservation of energy. Thus our life in the world is a constant interplay of causality and meaning.

There is a fourth phenomenal realm for Stein that I can mention only briefly. On the other side of the mind from sentience, so to speak, is the private personal realm, the realm of unique value, the core of personality. This core makes the choices from among the options that motivation offers to the mind, and it even contributes impulse power when sentient reserves are depleted.

For example, let's return to Hume's series of impressions begetting impressions. He writes: 'Grief and disappointment give rise to anger, anger to envy, envy to malice, and malice to grief again, till the whole circle be completed' (T 283). Grief, the first state, is surely an impression in sentience. Stein has argued, against Hume, that anger does not arise directly from grief. Rather, the meaning that spawns the grief motivates a further meaning, in the mental realm, that may spawn anger in the sentient realm. This gives Stein two ways in which the anger can be averted even when the grief is in full force. First, in the mental realm, grief motivates several possible rational responses: anger, but also for example resignation or sardonic humour. The presence of other meanings will influence which of these possibilities appears most rational in a given case. But suppose that anger still appears to be the most rational response. Then it can happen that a personal value such as forgiveness will intervene to tip the scales against anger. Although I cannot give an adequate presentation of these arguments here, this is enough to indicate the explanatory superiority of Stein's account over Hume's.

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In conclusion, let me suggest that Humean empiricism has been adopted by the sciences - both natural and human sciences - in an effort to guarantee the reliability of observation. If scientific descriptions are based entirely on Humean impressions, it is hoped, then the inexorable certitude of the cause-effect relation will trickle down from observations to conclusions. In every project, the researcher wishes to argue that exactly this description, and only this description, will be correct for the evidence. Unfortunately this hope is quite vain if Humean impressions are not simple and are not simply caused. Stein shows that evidence inheres in 'liveness,' which is a separable component of every impression, and which when subtracted yields a meaning as its simple remainder. Empirical observation thus is not the simplest building block of experience that Hume supposed it to be. It is a remainder arrived at through subtraction of life and of the motivated ideational processes that are accessible to life.

Stein, while deconstructing Humean empiricism, also constructed an approach to a more reliable scientific understanding of human thought and behaviour, including the thoughts and behaviours of natural scientists.

¹ This paper was originally presented to the Society for the Study of Women Philosophers, meeting in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, Eastern Division New York, December 28, 2000. Its original title was 'The Defeat of David Hume's Association Theory in Edith Stein's Psychology'.

² SC = Edith Stein: 'Sentient Causality' in *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, pp. 1-128. The Collected Works of Edith Stein 7 (Washington: ICS Publications, 2000).

³ T = David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978 (1888)).

⁴ Hume can even speak of 'identity' as a 'relation,' but not the same relation as 'resemblance'; T 14.

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Editor's Introduction

It gives me great pleasure to present to you herewith the *Yearbook of the Irish Philosophical Society 2004*. As you will see, it contains a variety of articles. Some of these have originated as papers given at our conference *Truth and the Reel*, Spring 2004 (B. McEown and P. Brereton) and one have originated from a 'Bioethics Study Group' conference *Changing Conceptions. IVF, Reproduction and Procreation* held in June 2004 at the Dublin Mater Hospital (H. Watt). Some were originally given as Thursday Lectures in Maynooth (B. Cosgrove; P. McLoughlin and P. Lyttle) and again others have been invited (M. Sawicki and J. McEvoy) or submitted (J. Lawel). Most contributions are Irish, but there are also Australian, American, Norwegian, Danish, and Polish voices. The volume contains a *Study Guide* to Edith Stein's *Philosophy of Psychology and the Humanities*, written by myself, which, together with the two articles by M. Sawicki constitute a beginner's guide to that work of Stein. I am very pleased to also include a statement from the archivist of the IPS on the state of the Society's archives.

Many people have been involved in the editorial process, accounting for the fact that all papers now are fully reviewed by at least one anonymous reviewer. Thanks are due to Garrett Barden, Hugh Bredin, Ciaran Clarke, John Cleary, Donal Daly, Michael Dunne, Tim Lynch, Cyril McDonnell, James McGuirk, Harry McCauley, Timothy Mooney and Marianne Sawicki. I am also very grateful for editorial assistance to some of our postgraduate students at NUIM, in particular Paul Doran, Haydn Gurmin, Alice Keane and Stephen McGroggan. Finally, I am grateful to the authors for submitting very interesting articles and complying with the reviewers' and the editor's remarks. I hope the publication in its new format will do justice to their work.

The 2003 Volume is edited by Thomas Kelly, and will be replaced by a book-form publication with the title *Metaphysics - W(h)ither Now?* (containing the papers given at one of the 2003