

## **Cat spiders: unHumean imaginings in the age of artificial intelligence?**

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*Abstract.* The Enlightenment philosopher David Hume's doctrine of the imagination entails that the imagination is limited in its creativity: it can only combine (or sometimes divide) ideas derived from sensory impressions, for example combine the ideas of blue and cat to imagine a blue cat. Sketches on my Instagram feed present me with much stranger things, produced by means of machines implementing artificial intelligence, such as depictions of cat spiders, as I call them. A cat spider has the body of a spider but the head of a cat. Are these a problem for Hume? They seem consistent with the doctrine of imagination presented, but they are a challenge to his conception of the mind as proceeding by customary associations.

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*Software used (freeware):* Google docs, [Google.com](https://www.google.com), Instagram, [jspaint.com](https://www.jspaint.com), [quitebasic.com](https://www.quitebasic.com)

*"A madman's amusement you here bring;  
This hybrid will never take wing"*

### **1. Introduction**

It will be useful to depart from conventions slightly and begin with an amusing scene. Let us imagine some people talking about imagination, of all topics. One person romantically says, "Imagination is a wonderful thing. Humans with their imaginations are different from mere animals. With their imaginations, they make stories and draw pictures and more." The other person replies, "Imagination is all very well, but too much of it is a problem. One has to carefully attend to reality as well. Too much imagination leads to madness." That is the scene over. The second speaker suggests that imagination is something which has immense power to conceive or present a world radically different from reality, but is that so? The great Enlightenment philosopher and empiricist David Hume thinks otherwise. Hume thinks that imagination can combine ideas derived from sensory experiences but one cannot imagine something totally new: all the constituents are derived from experience, copied from there. In the next part of this paper, I present Hume's philosophy of imagination in more detail. In the third part, I describe some artificial

intelligence sketches from the Internet which I have seen, featuring strange creatures: cat spider hybrids. I also reproduce an image from these. I propose that these creatures do not challenge Hume's doctrine of imagination presented above, but in the fourth part, I propose that they do challenge his conception of the mind as proceeding by customary associations.

## **2. Hume on imagination**

Hume divides the contents of a person's mind into impressions and ideas. Impressions involve feeling. When we have sensory perceptions, we have impressions. Ideas are involved in thinking. An idea, Hume, thinks is a faint copy of an impression or its simple components are. My idea of a mansion is a faint copy in my mind of a mansion whereas my impression of a mansion, when I stand before one, is a lively thing. (Hume's general claim is called his copy principle and here is a statement of it: "all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent." 1.1.1.7)

Hume also makes a division between simple and complex. Some impressions are simple, such as a simple impression of a high pitched sound. Some ideas are simple, such as an idea of a certain shade of blue. Other impressions and ideas are complex, that is, composed of the simple. An idea of a blue cat combines the ideas of being blue and being a cat.

With these two distinctions in place, we can grasp Hume's main doctrine of imagination. The imagination does not create anything simple. What it does is combine things, simple or complicated, or divide something complicated, and these things upon which it works have been derived in their simplicity or simple constituents from sensory experience, as fainter copies. One has experienced a shade of blue and experienced a cat and one can now imagine a blue cat: combining material copied from experience. One has experienced a cat, a complex experience, because one experiences the head, the tail, and more, and one can then imagine the head of the cat without the body. Hume's doctrine of imagination fits well with his empiricism, according to which there are no innate ideas, all ideas come from experience, and according to which all knowledge comes from the senses. He is one

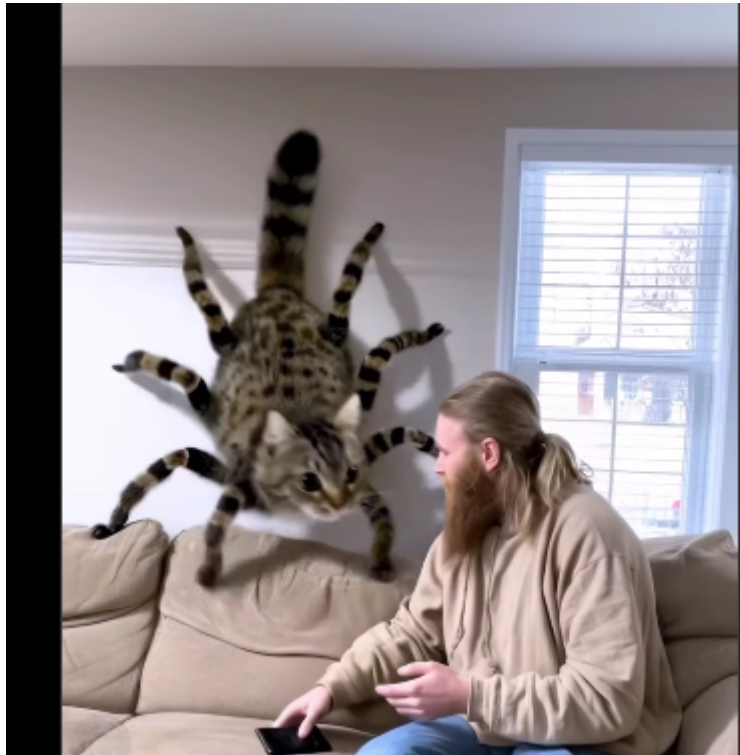
of the British empiricists. (But there is a question of whether Hume is entirely consistent: he thinks that if there is a missing shade of blue in the world, we can somehow imagine it. This is a problem for his philosophy, which I shall set aside.)

### **3. Cat spiders**

We are familiar with many strange hybrid creatures that people have imagined. Those of us who grew up in the West typically learn about the Greek myths and about hybrid creatures from that imaginary world. We learn about centaurs: creatures with the upper body of a human and the lower body of a horse. The Greek mythical world also features the Cretan monster, the minotaur: with the head of a bull and the body of a man. And satyrs: goat-man hybrids. I wonder whether the Greek conception of the living world as divided into types of creature, each of which has an essence, created severe puzzles of what would happen if two different types mated, for each must pass on its essence, and these mythological beings are the outcome of people metaphorically banging their imaginations against the wall of the assumptions of that time: the folk biology. “Surely there could be some successful offspring from these unions, but what would they be like given our essentialism?” Other people’s paradoxes, huh?

Of course, we live in an age far removed from ancient Greece. There has been industrialization. More recently, our lives have been transformed, since the late 1990s at least, by the Internet. Mail messages can be instantly sent. A document can be uploaded and it is instantly available for viewing by computer users connected to the global network of computers that is the Internet. Videos, composed of a sequence of images and usually sounds, can also be uploaded. There is an online site called Instagram, which has many such videos and which provides me with a “feed” of them, based on how the machine reads my preferences, or the software to be exact. I clicked on a few videos of cats produced with artificial intelligence software and now I have lots and lots of AI cat videos on the feed, the machine’s selection. And some of these videos show troubling hybrid creatures that I call cat spiders. They have the head of a cat and the body of a spider. I say the body of a spider, but the ones I have seen have legs covered in cat-like fur. They are quite realistic, such is the level of our artificial intelligence. First the Internet, now artificial intelligence! Anyway, are they a problem for Hume? Perhaps they are a slight

problem for his doctrine of imagination, given his specific list of operations that can be carried out on the raw material of sensation: make a fainter copy, combine, divide, etc. But the depictions look as if they are ultimately derived from sensory experience: from experiences of cats and spiders.



#### **4. Hume and customary associations**

I want to explore further the question of whether these cat spiders, and probably other hybrids, are a problem for Hume's philosophy. Even if the hybrid idea of a cat spider is derived from sensory experience, it is an unusual combination. Hume believes that our minds work in customary ways and appeals to this in response to philosophical problems he raises. For example, Hume, as standardly interpreted, denies that there is causation, understood as necessary connection. What is it for events of type A to cause events of type B? On the necessary connection account, or a simple one, whenever an event of type A occurs necessarily an event of type B subsequently occurs. Only then is there causation. Hume denies that we have an idea of necessary connection, because ideas are faint copies of what we experience, or combined from such copies, and we never experience necessary connection (nor is any necessity inferable from reflection, because there is no contradiction in

conceiving one event's occurring without the other). One ball hits another and another moves. We observe the first ball moving, the collision, and the second ball moving, but never do we observe necessity: a necessary connection between the event of the first ball striking the second and the event of the second moving. But what then is causation, if it is not necessary connection? Do we even have an idea of causation, given that we do not observe such connections? Hume thinks that the mind works in customary ways. Repeated observation of one type of event being followed by another type leads us to expect the second type after the first type occurs. He supposes an idea of causation comes from there.

Cat spiders pose a challenge for Hume's depiction of the mind as working by customary associations in general, in its expectations, its inferences, its imaginings. Presumably, someone asked the computer to produce cat spider depictions, but they seem more remote from habitual imaginings than unicorns or centaurs or the minotaur or satyrs or even mermaids. They are really weird! But I guess it is a minor problem overall. (I am interested in why different hybrid creatures are prominent in different societies. Given my earlier suggestion regarding why certain hybrid creatures were prominent in ancient Greek myth, perhaps cat spiders are a response to some problem of our time. The cat, for us in the West, is an independent and intuitive creature: we associate it with the feminine, though there can be male cats. And the spider is likewise. They are both considered somewhat evil. But cats are very different from spiders nevertheless. Maybe the hybrid is raising the issue of whether we actually think spider independence is different from cat independence, spider intuition is different from cat intuition, and spider evil from cat evil. Or else it raises this issue: why do we find this hybrid especially strange and disturbing, given the similar character profiles of "the parents"?)

## **Appendix**

This is code for sort-of homework I set, which I put on Instagram very early on today.

```
10 ARRAY A
20 LET X = 0
30 INPUT "Number of numbers to add?"; N
40 INPUT "Next number?"; B
50 LET A[X] = B
```

```
55 PRINT A[X]
60 LET X = X + 1
70 IF X < N THEN GOTO 40
80 LET X = 0
90 LET S = 0
100 LET B = A[X]
110 LET S = S + B
120 LET X = X + 1
130 IF X < N THEN GOTO 100
140 PRINT "SUM:"
150 PRINT S
```

## References

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(Hume research by respected commentator.)

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*Instagram* 21st November 2025:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DRUuQGXDzIN>

(A useful comparison.)

cat\_vlog365 and klingai\_official. Dragon cat. (My description). *Instagram* 4th

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Cottrell, J. n.d. David Hume: Imagination. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

Available at: <https://iep.utm.edu/hume-ima/>

(Seems very useful. How long will this be online for?)

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<https://philarchive.org/archive/DORH-2>

(It reminded me of the copy principle quote and also confirmed my use of the missing shade of blue.)

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<https://davidhume.org/texts/t/>

ohmyjuliet. 2025. Cat bird on woman's hand. *Instagram* 4th November 2025:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DQon-aXDBIC>

spiraluvcreative. 2025. Small cat spider. (My description.) *Instagram* 1st November 2025: [https://www.instagram.com/p/DQfBz-Vj\\_DE](https://www.instagram.com/p/DQfBz-Vj_DE)

spiraluvcreative. 2025. Large hungry cat spider climbing down wall. (My description.) *Instagram* 10th November 2025: <https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ3HuRijApF>

spiraluvcreative. 2025. Large cat spider and man in cream coloured domestic environment. (My description.) *Instagram* 12th November 2025:

<https://www.instagram.com/p/DQ7cG4UD47n>

(From which the cat spider image above was taken.)