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Hume on the Idea of Existence¹

Phillip D. Cummins

One, the primary, aim of this paper is to understand an argument Hume employed to defend his contention that there is no special or distinct idea of existence. This contention he expressed variously in the following passage:

The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form.²

My secondary aim is to understand what the quoted claim amounts to as a characterization of the idea of existence. I am among those who have serious difficulty understanding what precisely Hume is here claiming. Specifically, I am not sure how, if at all, his position on the idea of existence fits with other elements of his theory of thought.³ For example, earlier in the *Treatise*, in "Of Abstract Ideas," Hume argued that under suitable conditions of habituation and linguistic competence, a single simple⁴ idea could be the idea of both a particular object, a line drawn on a particular sheet of paper, and a type of object, line in general (T 20-24). Further, on the basis of appropriate comparisons, a single simple idea can also be the idea of two different qualities, purple and extended, for example (T 24-25, 34). The former claim is the positive component of Hume's account of abstract thinking; the latter is the positive component of his position on distinctions of reason. Hume goes out of his way to distinguish his position on the idea of existence from his position on distinctions of reason (T 67). As for how it differs, if at all, from his position on abstract ideas, a matter by no means obvious, Hume says nothing at all. His silence does not preclude speculation on the subject—on the contrary, it makes such speculation unavoidable—but it does give special importance to his brief and puzzling proof that there is no special or distinct idea of existence.

I. Hume's Argument

In making his case that we have no distinct idea of existence Hume first insists that we have an idea of existence, appealing to what he regards as an undeniable matter of psychological fact. He writes,

There is no impression nor idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceiv'd as existent; and 'tis evident, that from this consciousness the most perfect idea and assurance of *being* is deriv'd. (T 66)

The argument seems to comprise the following propositions: attending to consciousness and memory reveals that all the perceptions we experience or remember are believed to exist; one cannot believe in the existence of something unless one has an idea of existence; therefore, there is an idea of existence (being) which in some way is derived from consciousness and memory. Hume next formulates what he calls a dilemma.

From hence we may form a dilemma, the most clear and conclusive that can be imagin'd, *viz.* that since we never remember any idea or impression without attributing existence to it, the idea of existence must either be deriv'd from a distinct impression, conjoin'd with every perception or object of our thought, or must be the very same with the idea of the perception or object. (T 66)

The alternatives seem clear: either, in believing in the past existence of, say, a blue spot once seen, one has two ideas, one of the blue spot and a different one of existence, or one has only one idea, which somehow is both the idea of the spot and the idea of existence. What is not immediately obvious is why Hume speaks of a dilemma. From the supposed psychological fact (we never remember any idea or impression without attributing existence to it) and its corollary (we have an idea of existence) Hume develops a disjunction (either the idea of existence is derived from a distinct impression conjoined with every perception, or it is the very same with the idea of each perception believed to exist). The argument following immediately afterwards surely is a disjunctive syllogism. In the first of the next two paragraphs, using the implied premise that if there were a distinct idea of existence, it would have to be derived from a distinct impression of existence, Hume argues that there is no distinct impression of existence conjoined with every other perception, concluding "the idea of existence is not deriv'd from any particular impression" (T 66). In the second he states the conclusion quoted at the beginning of this paper. Two alternatives

are formulated as exhausting the possibilities; one is rejected, and the other is embraced. This is a disjunctive syllogism, not a dilemma, unless, of course, Hume has strayed from the technical meaning of "dilemma."

He did not stray. Hume speaks of a dilemma, I submit, because his overall argument for the conclusion that there is no distinct idea of existence is constituted of a series of arguments, which I shall hereafter call components, and one of these components is or includes a dilemma. The key to this interpretation is Hume's position that every simple idea must be derived from a prior corresponding simple impression. In presenting his argument Hume comments, "this dilemma is an evident consequence of the principle, that every idea arises from a similar impression" (T 66). Hume could not consistently hold that there is a corresponding impression for every idea—as is shown by his example of the idea of New Jerusalem (T 3), so the causal derivation of ideas cannot go as he here claims. Consequently, one must interpret the principle as the different, but similar and definitely Humean claim that every *simple* idea arises from a corresponding impression (T 4). Hume's invocation of this derivation principle suggests that the following are three of the components of his overall argument:

Component 1:

- a Every impression and idea of which we have any consciousness or memory is conceived as existent.
- b To conceive of something as existent requires an idea of existence.

From *a* and *b* one can derive:

- c One has an idea of existence.

Component 2:

- c One has an idea of existence.
- d If one has an idea of existence, then either it is a distinct idea of existence or it is the same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist.
- e If the idea of existence is a distinct idea, then it is either a simple idea or it is not a simple idea.
- f₁ If the idea of existence is simple, then it is derived from a distinct impression of existence.
- f₂ If the idea of existence is not simple, then the term "existence" is definable.

From *c* and *d* one can derive:

- d* Either there is a distinct idea of existence or the idea of existence is the same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist.

From d^* and e one can derive:

- e^* Either the idea of existence is simple or it is not simple or it is the same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist.

From e^* , f_1 , and f_2 by partial dilemma one can derive:

- g Either the idea of existence is the same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist or it is derived from a distinct impression of existence or the term "existence" is definable.

Component 3:

- g Either the idea of existence is the same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist or it is derived from a distinct impression of existence or the term "existence" is definable.

- h If there is no distinct impression of existence, then the idea of existence is not derived from a distinct impression of existence.

- i_1 There is no distinct impression of existence.

- i_2 The term "existence" is not definable.

From h and i_1 one can derive:

- i_3 The idea of existence is not derived from a distinct impression of existence.

From g , i_2 and i_3 one can derive Hume's conclusion:

- j The idea of existence is the very same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist.

Note that premises c and d together imply a disjunction, d^* , either there is a distinct idea of existence or the idea of existence is the same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist. From it, by means of conditionals e , f_1 , and f_2 , one can logically infer a second disjunction, g . This pattern of argument is one type of dilemma. Hume may have misled in calling his overall argument a dilemma, since the dilemma component is but a part of his overall argument, but he was not guilty of simply conflating disjunctive syllogism with dilemma.

Of the alternatives incorporated in g , only two receive serious consideration. One is Hume's position that the idea of existence is the very same with the idea of anything which can be believed to exist. The second, its real rival, is that there is a simple impression of existence from which a distinct simple idea of existence is derived. Hume does not seem to have taken seriously the possibility that "existence" can be defined, so that the idea of existence is both distinct and complex. Thus, it is somewhat artificial to formulate premise e as I have and to include premises f_2 and i_2 in the argument. I have done so primarily for the

sake of completeness, feeling confident that were it objected to Hume that the idea of existence might be both distinct and complex, he would have rejected the suggestion emphatically.⁵ Still, in the text itself Hume concentrated exclusively on eliminating the alternative that there is a distinct simple idea of existence and did so by denying the impression called for by his principle on the derivation of simple ideas.

One might call the thesis that there is a distinct impression of existence the distinctness alternative or *DA*. Proposition i_1 denies *DA* and what I shall call the fourth component of Hume's overall argument is his argument for i_1 . Like the other components, Hume's argument for i_1 is not fully explicit. Also like them, it is not easy to comprehend. Here, in his words, is the argument:

So far from there being any distinct impression, attending every impression and every idea, that I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd. Tho' certain sensations may at one time be united, we quickly find they admit of a separation, and may be presented apart. And thus, tho' every impression and idea we remember be consider'd as existent, the idea of existence is not deriv'd from any particular impression. (T 66)

This passage requires careful examination. The first thing to notice is that it does not include the explicit conclusion that there is no distinct impression of existence. It is, however, an argument against *DA*, as can be seen by considering one of its apparent shortcomings. On its face the argument seems almost totally irrelevant to the question of whether or not the idea of existence is derived from a distinct impression of existence. It emphatically states that no impression of existence accompanies all other impressions and ideas, but that hardly proves the idea of existence is not derived from a distinct impression of existence. In all other attempts to tie simple ideas to prior impressions, Hume never worries about whether or not the impression is accompanied by other impressions. He merely points to or denies the appropriate impression. Why not follow the same procedure with the impression of existence? To block this criticism Hume must be taken to hold the unstated premise that if there were a distinct impression of existence, it would accompany every other perception. This premise would give point to his emphatic denial of accompaniment. Nor is the premise outrageous or indefensible. All the perceptions of which one is conscious exist. The impression of existence is invoked to account for or ground their existence. Hence, there is good reason to hold that if there were a distinct impression of existence, it would accompany every other existent or at least every other existent of which one is conscious.

With this premise in place, Hume's statement becomes an argument against *DA*. We have then a further component of the overall argument.

Component 4:

- k* If there were a distinct impression of existence, it would accompany every other perception of which one is conscious.
- l* It is not the case that an impression of existence accompanies every other perception of which one is conscious.

From *k* and *l* is derived:

- i*₁ There is no distinct impression of existence.

It remains to consider what Hume wrote in support of *l*. Unfortunately, the relevant passage provides a new difficulty. Taken literally, the argument it presents seems strange indeed. However, on what initially seems a more plausible reading, the argument for *l* is irremediably defective. Thus, the strange literal reading must be taken seriously.

Let us consider the previously quoted passage containing Hume's argument, this time seeking an argument for *l*. He wrote,

So far from there being any distinct impression, attending every impression and every idea, that I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd. Tho' certain sensations may at one time be united, we quickly find they admit of a separation, and may be presented apart. And thus, tho' every impression and idea we remember be consider'd as existent, the idea of existence is not deriv'd from any particular impression. (T 66)

It seems easy enough to construct the final component of Hume's argument. He undeniably asserts that no two distinct impressions are inseparably conjoined. He undeniably concludes that it is not the case that a distinct impression of existence accompanies every other impression. His argument seems to require only a conditional which asserts that if a distinct impression of existence accompanied every other impression, then it would be inseparably conjoined with each of those impressions. This would yield:

Component 5:

- m* If a distinct impression of existence accompanied every other perception, then it would be inseparably conjoined with each of those perceptions.
- n* No two impressions are inseparably conjoined.

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- o If no two impressions are inseparably conjoined, then it is not the case that an impression of existence is inseparably conjoined with every other perception.

From *m*, *n*, and *o* are derived:

- l It is not the case that an impression of existence accompanies every other perception.

The problem with this construction is that *m* seems utterly implausible. This can be seen by considering the general principle it seems to instantiate, which is that if any perception accompanied every other perception, then it would be inseparably conjoined with each of them. This seems both utterly implausible and decidedly un-Humean. Therefore, to make Component 5 work as an interpretation of Hume's argument, one must provide cogent reasons why Hume would invoke *m*. And that seems extremely difficult to do.

Why it is difficult can be grasped by considering his goal, which is refuting *DA*. Two main strategies are available. One is to argue that both premises *k* and *l* in Component 4 are necessarily true, so that Component 4 is an a priori proof that a distinct impression of existence is impossible. The other is to argue that *l* is factually true, which only requires showing that at least one perception is not accompanied by the supposed impression of existence. Given how much less the second strategy requires to succeed, the first seems to involve argumentative overkill. Consequently, one needs a very good reason for attributing it to Hume. There is nothing in the context of Hume's argument which points unambiguously in the direction of the first strategy. He does not explicitly conclude that a distinct impression of existence is impossible, nor does he explicitly assert that it is impossible for an impression of existence to accompany another or all other perceptions. Hence, it initially seems reasonable to hold that Hume's strategy is proving that in fact not every perception is accompanied by a distinct impression of existence. He seemingly contends, first, that if there were an impression of existence, it would accompany every other perception, and, second, that it is just not the case that every perception is so accompanied. The only problem with this reading is what Hume actually wrote in defence of the second claim. It is extremely difficult, if not wholly impossible, to make out a case for a factual reading that is not faced with insuperable objections. Let us consider that reading and those objections.

Hume writes "I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd" (T 66). This, on the factual reading of the argument for *l*, is offered as conclusive evidence that a distinct impression of existence does not accompany every impression and idea. However, the former obviously cannot prove the latter. In the passage

quoted Hume asserts separability. On the factual reading he infers separation; but the truth of Hume's separability claim is just not incompatible with non-separation. Separability does not imply separation. This point can be exhibited in at least two ways. In so exhibiting it I shall hold as constant that inseparability is necessary connection and that separability precludes necessary connection. Suppose, first, that accompaniment (non-separation) means accompaniment in a single instance and separation means total non-accompaniment. Suppose, second, that accompaniment means constant or uniform conjunction, so that separation (non-accompaniment) is the occurrence of one or more unconjoined instances. On neither alternative does separability imply separation. As Hume knew well, denying necessary connection is fully compatible with affirming constant conjunction. "X's and Y's are not inseparably connected" is logically compatible with "an X accompanies every Y and a Y accompanies every X." Hence, the truth of the former cannot be the grounds for inferring the falsity of the latter.

One way out of this problem is to hold that Hume mistakenly wrote "inseparably conjoined" when he meant "constantly conjoined." On this remedy, Hume's statement that "I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are inseparably conjoin'd" (T 66) should be read as "I do not think there are any two distinct impressions, which are constantly conjoin'd." On this reading Hume is not guilty of inferring separation from separability. He instead asserts universal separation (no two perceptions are constantly conjoined) and infers from it separation in a particular case (existence is not conjoined with all other perceptions). For a variety of reasons this way out fails. An immediate problem is that throughout the passage containing his argument Hume consistently writes of separability. Thus, to support his claim that no two distinct impressions are "inseparably conjoined," he writes, "Tho' certain sensations may at one time be united, we quickly find they admit of a separation, and may be presented apart" (T 66). The phrases "admit of a separation" and "may be presented apart" assert separability, not separation, so the sentence containing them reinforces the separability interpretation and thus renders less plausible the reading which substitutes "constantly conjoined" for "inseparably conjoined."

Another serious difficulty awaits. The amended proposition, no two distinct impressions are constantly conjoined, still seems insufficient to establish *l*. If no two impressions of any kind are constantly conjoined, then it does indeed follow that no impression or idea is constantly conjoined with the impression of existence. This, however, is not yet to prove *l*, according to which "[i]t is not the case that an impression of existence accompanies every other perception of which

one is conscious." That is because "accompaniment" in *k* and *l* need not be understood as constant conjunction. It seems quite enough to hold that every perception exists if and only if a distinct impression of existence accompanies or is conjoined with it on the occasion, but just on the occasion, when it exists. If this is so, Hume's assertion that no two impressions are constantly conjoined, would on this interpretation be inadequate to disprove the thesis that an impression of existence accompanies each other impression. The absence of constant conjunction is quite compatible with accompaniment of each perception by the impression of existence.

Waiving these objections, let us agree that "accompany" in premises *k* and *l* means constant conjunction and that when Hume wrote "not inseparably conjoined" he really meant "not constantly conjoined." On this reading, *k* asserts that if there were a distinct impression of existence, it would be constantly conjoined with every other perception. Premise *l*, correspondingly, now denies that every other perception is constantly conjoined with the impression of existence on the general ground that no two perceptions are constantly conjoined. One objection remains; it cannot be overcome. The proposition used to establish premise *l* seems both false and contrary to what Hume thinks. Are we really to think that Hume defended *l* by denying all constant conjunctions? He did, of course, deny our ability to know that a conjunction hitherto found to be fully uniform is completely constant, but that is not to deny constant conjunctions as such. To have done the latter, given at least one of his definitions of causation, would have been to hold that there are no causal connections at all. When Hume was charged with having denied that there are causes, he emphatically denied it. There are causal connections, which are or include constant conjunctions.

If these criticisms hold, it is implausible to claim that Component 4, the argument against *DA*, is best interpreted as offering factual grounds for rejecting a distinct impression of existence. Hence, the more radical interpretation of the argument, Component 5, and its problematic premise *m* must be given a serious look. To abandon the factual approach to refuting *DA* is to insist that if a distinct impression of existence accompanied every other perception, it would accompany them necessarily or be connected inseparably with them. This is precisely what premise *m* in Component 5 asserts.

Invoking *m* has some signal advantages, despite its apparent strangeness and surface implausibility. Premise *m* lays down a general requirement for there being a distinct impression of existence: if there is such a thing, it not only accompanies every other perception, it also is inseparably connected to every other perception. Premise *n* provides a general ground for denying such a connection. Thus, Hume's appeal

to separability to refute *DA* becomes fully intelligible. That he did so appeal to separability is reinforced by a passage not yet considered. After presenting his argument, Hume issues a challenge to those not yet ready to accept his conclusion. He writes,

Whoever opposes this, must necessarily point out that distinct impression, from which the idea of entity is deriv'd, and must prove, that this impression is inseparable from every perception we believe to be existent. This we may without hesitation conclude to be impossible. (T 67)⁶

Another advantage is that what Hume explicitly appeals to as decisive on this issue (no two impressions are inseparable) has already been defended in the *Treatise*. An unforced reading of the sentence, "Tho' certain sensations may at one time be united, we quickly find they admit of a separation, and may be presented apart," is that the word "find" is to be interpreted as discover rather than observe. On this reading, to "quickly find" is to recall the previously discovered (or asserted) metaphysical thesis that no two distinct perceptions are inseparably conjoined. This principle was based on biconditionals linking distinctness, distinguishability, and separability, which were previously introduced in discussing abstract ideas (T 10, 18-20, 24-25).

A real problem remains. It is the original one of finding a good reason for Hume to hold *m*. One needs to show why, if a distinct impression of existence were to accompany another impression, it would have to be inseparably connected with that other impression. There is a further subsidiary task. It is showing that the interpretation does not commit Hume to the position that existents exist necessarily. Since, it might be claimed, Hume certainly held that nothing exists necessarily, a defence of *m* which implies that whatever exists exists necessarily must be rejected as un-Humean. However, the objection continues, interpreting "accompanies" as "necessarily accompanies" does make *m* imply that whatever exists exists necessarily, so *m* cannot be part of Hume's argument against *DA*. This objection requires an answer.

In the remainder of Part I, I shall first offer an argument that even though there is no general principle about the connection of perceptions or entities in general from which *m* can be derived, the assumption of a distinct impression of existence does require that it be inseparably connected to each impression it accompanies. I shall not argue that this argument is successful or completely cogent, only that were it successful, it would secure *m* and thereby secure Hume's argument against *DA*. I shall conclude with a brief but, I hope, decisive argument that attributing *m* to Hume does not commit him to necessary existents.

Why, on *DA*, does accompaniment require inseparability or necessary accompaniment? My answer is formulated as the final component or components of Hume's overall argument.

Component 6a:

- q* If there were a distinct impression of existence, then the existence of any other impression just is its being conjoined to (accompanied by) the impression of existence.
- r* If something's existence just is its being conjoined to something else, then it is impossible for it to exist without conjunction to the other or to exist when the other does not exist.

From *q* and *r* are derived:

- s* If there were a distinct impression of existence, it would be impossible for any other impression to exist without being conjoined to it or to exist when it does not exist.

Component 6b:

- t* For something to occur separately from something else is for the former to exist without conjunction to the latter or to exist when the latter does not exist.

Correspondingly,

- t** For something to be separable from something else is for it to be possible that the former exists without conjunction to the latter or to exist when the latter does not.
- u* If an impression other than the impression of existence were separable from the latter, then it would be possible for it to exist in the absence of the impression of existence or to exist when the latter does not. [This from *t**.]

From *s* and *u* are derived:

- m** If there were a distinct impression of existence, it would be impossible for any other impression to be conjoined with it yet be separable from it.

And from *m** is derived:

- m* If a distinct impression of existence accompanied every other perception, it would be inseparable from each of those other perceptions.

Hume's rejection of a distinct impression of existence amounts to an argument that such an impression by its nature and function would have to be inseparable from every other existing impression, since the very existence of those other impressions would require their conjunction with it, whereas separation would require their existence unconjoined from the impression of existence. Since this result would

violate the fundamental principle of (his) metaphysics that no two wholly distinct beings are necessarily conjoined with or inseparable from one another, a distinct impression of existence is impossible. Here, then, is a reason why Hume might hold *m*, and thus appeal to the separability of all impressions from one another in order to deny the existence of a distinct impression of existence, and thus a distinct idea of existence.⁷

One can put my main point about Hume's argument against *DA* somewhat differently. He explicates separability in terms of the possibility of existing apart. Contingent connections are explicated in terms of separability, which amounts to nothing more than the possibility of existing apart. Existing is thus a more primitive concept in his philosophy than separability and contingent connection. It therefore is odd, if not incoherent on his view, to speak of the separability or inseparability of existence from other items. Speaking so would imply that contingent existence is to be explicated as the separability of existence from an item with which it is connected. For Hume, however, separation presupposes existing apart. Consequently, it is absurd to suppose something existing apart from that in virtue of connection with which it exists. Not existing seems to require existing apart from the property of existence—very strange. My suggestion is that Hume employed the language of the hypothesis of an accompanying impression of existence in order to refute the hypothesis, ignoring the fact that it is scarcely stateable or intelligible on his principles.⁸

It might be objected that one need not, as I do, interpret the argument against a distinct idea of existence as involving a wholly new line of thought, since it can be perfectly well understood as an application of the position defended earlier in the *Treatise* that ideas of abstract objects are not distinct ideas. For example, Hume insisted that there is no idea of line in general in addition to the numerous and varied ideas of particular lines. We can think of line in general; there is, therefore, an idea of line in general; it is not, however, a different or additional idea. The interpretation being proposed would have us take the argument against a distinct idea of existence as nothing more than an application of the Humean position that abstract ideas are not distinct and purely general ideas.

The least detailed version of this line of interpretation would have us read Hume in *Treatise* I, ii, 6 as merely arguing that since an idea of existence is clearly abstract, and no abstract idea is distinct from the ideas of the objects said to instantiate the abstract property it represents, it follows that the idea of existence is not an idea distinct from the ideas of those objects one can believe to exist. It must be noted, however, that Hume's stated reason for denying a distinct idea of

existence has no apparent connection with the earlier denial of distinct ideas of abstract objects. No appeal is made in *Treatise* I, ii, 6 to the earlier conclusion of *Treatise* I, i, 7 that no abstract idea is distinct from the ideas of its instantiations. Moreover, in the earlier rejection of general indeterminate ideas, Hume appealed in his first argument (T 18-19) to the internal simplicity of particular objects such as lines, in his second argument (T 19) to the particularity of all impressions, and in his third argument (T 19-20) to the dogma that only particular things exist. In contrast, the decisive point made against the possibility of a distinct idea of existence is that no two impressions are inseparable from one another. This seems to be a new argument, which would explain its location in part 2 rather than part 1.⁹

Another version of the no-new-argument interpretation might be that Hume's argument against a distinct idea of existence is only a slightly modified version of his argument against the traditional understanding of distinctions of reason. Traditionally, according to Hume, it is alleged that an item really distinct or different from another may nevertheless be inseparable from it. Hume argued that different or distinct things are always discernible from one another, which implies that our ideas of them are also different, and thus separable from one another. Since separability of ideas implies separability of objects, it follows that no item is both different from another and inseparable from it. How, I wonder, can this argument, admittedly Hume's, be directed against a distinct idea of existence, save on the interpretation defended in this paper? The defender of a distinct idea of existence might well grant Hume's argument about difference and separability and proceed to claim first, that existence is both distinct and separable from the objects which exist; second, that the idea of existence is both distinct and separable from the ideas of the things believed to exist; and third, that the separability of existence from other items explains why existence is always contingent. Hume, in contrast, takes the separability of all impressions from one another as evidence *against* a distinct impression of existence which accompanies all other perceptions. This line of reasoning is intelligible only on the premise, central to my interpretation, that if there were such an accompanying impression of existence, it would be inseparable from all of the perceptions it accompanies.

A third variation concedes that inseparability is crucial to Hume's argument against an impression of existence, but denies that this precludes treating the argument against a distinct idea of existence as a variant on an earlier argument against truly distinct abstract ideas. It is held that one of Hume's arguments against an idea of, say, length in general, is that it is impossible for length in general to exist by itself, but would be possible were there a distinct idea of length in general,

since whatever can be represented by a distinct idea is possible. On this variant, the argument against a distinct idea of existence is that existence is inseparable from the impressions and ideas it accompanies, but would be capable of separate existence were there a distinct idea of existence. This is an argument Hume could have used; the issue, however, is whether he did. My answer is no. The very simplicity of the argument works against the proposed interpretation. On the argument just sketched, the easily stated crucial point is that the separate existence of existence is impossible,¹⁰ but a distinct idea of existence would secure its possibility. On it, there is no reason to introduce impressions, no reason to consider the implications of an impression of existence accompanying every other perception, and no reason to claim that no two impressions are inseparable. These, however, are precisely the points introduced by Hume in the text under interpretation.

Having rejected these alternative interpretations, I turn next to the question of contingent existence. It was agreed earlier for the sake of the argument that for Hume, whatever exists exists contingently. How, then, it was asked, could he consistently hold that an impression of existence distinct from the perceptions it accompanies is inseparably connected with each and every one of those perceptions? He couldn't; and he didn't. On my interpretation, he merely held on the basis of principles he did accept and for the reasons given, that the theory of a distinct impression of existence, which he did not hold, requires such an inseparable connection. The point of the final component of his overall argument is to destroy the hypothesis of a distinct impression of existence by showing the impossibility of what it requires. To do so does not commit Hume to the doctrine of necessary existence.

II. Existence and the Idea of Existence

By now, even the most patient readers may feel that little has been done to clarify what exactly Hume holds about the idea of existence. Such readers may have granted the value of examining Hume's reasons for rejecting a rival position in order to become clear about his own. Their present frustration may stem from my failure to specify sufficiently what Hume rejected when he denied that there is a distinct impression of existence. They thus want to know what exactly a distinct impression of existence would be were there, contrary to Hume, such an impression. My answer is: existence itself. In part, this is merely to say something about impressions and about how not to construe "of" in the expression, "impression of existence." There is no reason to believe that in *Treatise* I, ii Hume construed impressions as inherently representative entities, such that an impression of existence would be a psychological state which by its very nature *represents*, or *is of* existence something different from itself.¹¹ Instead, impressions are of

what they are. An example may clarify this somewhat cryptic claim. A momentary blue spot, an object of sight, Hume would call an impression of blue. However, it is not in itself and by its nature *of* blue; rather, it *is* blue. The blue spot is an impression; there is no impression of the blue spot. On this approach, an impression of existence would be existence itself. The word "impression" in "impression of existence" merely connotes that existence is an object of experience.

As was made apparent in a passage quoted above, Hume held that all the perceptions (impressions and ideas) of which one is conscious exist and are believed to exist. On *DA*, existence would be something distinct from those perceptions and would be experienced along with them. Hume's characterization of it as an impression is appropriate, or at least more appropriate than calling it an idea. Of Hume's two kinds of perceptions, ideas function representationally and impressions do not.¹² The existence which would accompany all other perceptions would itself not represent anything; it would merely be that in virtue of which the existing perceptions exist. Hence, were one to consider existence itself a perception, on the grounds that like the perceptions it accompanies it is experienced, it would best be classified as an impression.¹³ On the assumptions, (1) that existence is unique and irreducible (simple); and (2) that each simple idea is derived from a corresponding simple impression, the hypothesis Hume rejects is that a distinct idea of existence is derived through the experience of existence, a special item one experiences whenever one experiences any other item.

If I am correct in suggesting that for Hume an impression of existence, which he denied, would just be existence as experienced, it could be said that what Hume is claiming about existence is that it is not a something. Existence cannot be given ontological status. It is not an entity and so can be neither an object of experience (an impression) nor an object of thought (an idea or an object of an idea). Nor can it be a quality of an object of experience or thought. This does not follow straightforwardly and directly from Hume's denial of an impression of existence. The best I can say in defense of this proposal is that the argument against an impression of existence which I have attributed to him can be formulated in a completely general way against any position which ontologizes existence. Hume formulates it psychologically as an argument about perceptions or impressions, but it turns on the point that no distinct entities are inseparable from one another; but existence, construed ontologically, would be inseparable from every entity with which it is conjoined.

In an article on Hume's treatment of existence, Dennis E. Bradford introduces a position according to which "existence" is a term of classification.¹⁴ As I understand it, the fundamental category is that of

objects, which either exist or do not. Those which have the property of existence form a class: existents. Those which lack the property form its complementary class: non-existents. On this position, which I shall call the classification view of existence, the argument of Components 6a and 6b clearly fails, since the view allows an object severed from existence to have nevertheless enough ontological status to permit that separation; whereas, on my interpretation, Hume's argument is that when existence is understood as something distinct from that which exists, so that an object's existing is its being conjoined to existence, its separation—its being unconjoined—from existence is impossible. An object's separability from existence would be intelligible and possible, on the classification account, since separation would not be understood as somehow existing when not existent.¹⁵ The question is: why should one attribute the classification account to Hume? If my reading of the argument against a distinct impression of existence is correct, then, since the classification account cannot permit that argument and would be refuted by the purely general version of it, there is a strong reason to deny that Hume held that account. Were there independent evidence of Hume's commitment in the *Treatise* to the classification view, it would also tend to discredit my interpretation of the argument against a distinct idea of existence. To my knowledge there is no such evidence.¹⁶

Another position Hume rejected is that one can derive the idea of existence by a distinction of reason. To understand what he denies and why he denies it, we must first understand somewhat his account of how quality distinctions are drawn. To this purpose imagine two blue spots, one square and the other circular. Since both are extended, both are compositionally complex, being divisible into parts. However, Hume holds, both are ontologically simple. This means that although we can in some way distinguish in each case between the spot and its colour, and between the colour and the shape, ontologically and at the level of ideas the only genuine difference is between the two spots. Consequently, the supposed account of existence as a quality of the items we experience fails immediately because Hume permits no distinction between particular objects and their qualities. In his attempt to explain this unusual position, Hume explained his version of the doctrine of distinctions of reason. He maintained that by comparing an ontologically simple item, say the square blue spot, to a number of other simple items, one finds that it can resemble a number of different items which do not however resemble one another. This permits or requires a language of qualities and quality distinctions. Thus, suppose there is an idea of a particular blue spot, which also functions as one's idea of, say, blue, on the basis of similarities between the particular object and other particular objects. While remaining

unchanged, it can also function as the idea of another quality on the basis of similarities to a different class of objects. This holds for every quality ascribed to the object.

Applying this method for generating quality distinctions might seem a useful way of explaining how the idea of existence can be the idea of that which is known to exist. After all, the idea of blue is also the idea of the spot known to exist. Hume, however, rejects this approach. He writes,

Our foregoing reasoning concerning the *distinction* of ideas without any real *difference* will not here serve us in any stead. That kind of distinction is founded on the different resemblances, which the same simple idea may have to several different ideas. But no object can be presented resembling some object with respect to its existence, and different from others in the same particular; since every object, that is presented, must necessarily be existent. (T 67)

Hume's argument turns on his premise that an indispensable condition for drawing a distinction without a difference and being able to assign a common quality to a group of objects is experience of an object which does not resemble the objects in the group in the way they resemble one another. Hume takes it to be a necessary inference that since in acquiring an idea of existence all the objects (impressions and ideas) being compared are perceptions of which one is conscious, they all exist. Consequently, no object differs from the rest with respect to existence. This implies that no idea of existence (understood as a quality of objects) can be generated by the required comparisons.

What, then, can be said of Hume's position on the idea of existence? I don't know. I can only tell a story which includes a sketch of an account of its origin and thereby suggest a position I think is consistent with what Hume says. Here is the story: Part I: There are things or objects. One and all, they exist contingently;¹⁷ but there is no entity, no thing, object, or quality, existence, which gives existence to all other things by a connection with them. Part II: Some existents are experienced. Experience of those existing objects yields ideas. Ideas exist. They also represent (are of) objects. The object of each initial idea actually exists. Moreover, everything of which one has an idea is a possible existent and each idea represents its object as it would be were it to exist. This and this alone, I think, is what Hume means when he says, "Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent" (T 67). Further, since all original ideas are acquired from experience of objects (impressions) or the experience of other ideas, all objects of ideas are possible objects of experience and, as Hume put it, "[T]is impossible for us so much as to

conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions" (T 67). Part III: Once acquired, ideas can occur whether their objects continue to exist or not. Moreover, by combining ideas one can acquire new ideas of objects which do not exist, have not existed, and may never exist. Because of this ability to think of objects regardless of whether they exist and the resulting need to distinguish in thought and speech those objects which do from those which do not, an ideational category or operation is required. Hume, however, had no theory of a logical operator, so instead of addressing the problem of how it would work and where it should be located in an account of human understanding, he emphasized the negative point that there is no special or distinct idea of existence. His meagre positive account put misplaced emphasis on the items on which an operator would operate, leaving it incapable of the distinctions required of an adequate account of how various positive and negative existence claims would be thought. If this line of speculation is accurate, Hume's treatment of the idea of existence is incomplete and therefore inadequate. Nevertheless, Hume got right the central point that existence cannot itself be an object or a quality of an object.

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1. This paper was written while on research assignment from the University of Iowa at its Center for Advanced Studies, whose atmosphere and equipment greatly facilitate scholarship. Comments on an earlier draft by my colleagues in the Department of Philosophy at Iowa, especially Richard Fumerton, proved very helpful.
2. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 66-67 (hereafter cited as "T").
3. I am also among those who believe his position, as it stands, does not permit him to make all the distinctions needed regarding believing in and merely considering positive and negative existence claims. Defending this criticism is not my present business.
4. I argue in my as-yet-unpublished paper, "Hume's Doctrine of Ontological Simples," that there are three different ways in which Hume draws the simple/complex distinction. The claims about abstraction and distinctions of reason being briefly presented in the body of the present paper cannot be fully understood without becoming clear about Hume's three versions of the simple/complex distinction. In contrast, the issue to which the present paper is

devoted, the nature and derivation of the idea of existence, does not require careful delineation of the three different senses of simplicity. For the record, the sense of simplicity employed in Hume's discussion of the present issue is what in the other paper I call conceptual simplicity.

5. It is obvious that Hume would have rejected some proposed definitions of existence because of systemic commitments. For example, against "A exists" means "A stands in spatial and temporal relationships to other objects," he would have advanced his contention that there are things which exist and yet stand in no spatial relationships whatsoever. On the proposed definition, however, these non-spatial existents would not exist. (See T 235-36.) I would venture the guess that Hume's general ground for rejecting all proposed definitions of "existence" would be that such definitions would unavoidably be formulated in terms of one or more qualities or one or more relations, but that the occurrence of such qualities and relations presupposes the existence of objects which have those qualities or stand in those relations and whose existence, therefore, cannot consist in having those qualities or standing in those relations. See note 7 for a general reason Hume might have had for ignoring the alternative of a complex distinct idea of existence, one which would not require assertion of the indefinability of "existence." If it were taken seriously, my reconstruction of the argument against a distinct idea of existence could be made somewhat less complex.
6. Note that Hume does not stop with his usual challenge to produce an impression. He further demands what he takes to be impossible, proof of an inseparable connection.
7. Since it turns not on the internal structure or content of the impression of existence, but rather on what would be required for its contingent accompaniment of (conjunction with, but separability from) other perceptions, the argument against an impression of existence is sufficiently general to work, if it works at all, whether the supposed impression is simple or complex. This may explain why Hume was unconcerned with denying the hypothesis that the idea of existence is both distinct and complex. For Hume, there can be an idea of something only if there could be a corresponding impression of it. Since he thinks there could be no distinct impression of it, for reasons having to do with its connections with other perceptions, there can be no distinct idea of it, simple or complex.
8. Moving to, or perhaps crossing the boundary of intelligibility, let us ask: could one avoid *m* by holding that even though an impression distinct from the impression of existence cannot itself

exist apart from existence, the latter (existence) could somehow occur separately from the former? In such a case, the impression other than the impression of existence would not exist, but that would not preclude separation. That is because separation on this supposition would consist in the occurrence of the impression of existence apart from an impression with which on some other occasion it is conjoined. One could thus claim that *DA* does not require an indefensible inseparability of impressions. If the supposition of the separate existence of an impression of existence were defensible, it might provide an objection to Hume's argument. However, it is incoherent. Occurring alone, as the impression of existence is supposed to do, still requires existing. However, on a theory requiring an impression of existence to account for the existence of things, the impression of existence cannot intelligibly be said to exist. Were an impression of existence (distinct from all other impressions) to exist, either its existence is its being accompanied by an impression of existence distinct from itself or it is not. If the latter, something can exist without being accompanied by an impression of existence, contrary to the theory according to which existing just is being conjoined to an impression of existence. If the former, then the new impression would also have to exist, which would require another impression of existence distinct from the original impression of existence. The additional impression of existence would in turn for the same reasons require another impression of existence and so on *ad infinitum*. The exercise just completed will not be needed, of course, if the propositions expressing the accompaniment requirements are conditionals, not biconditionals, and merely require that if an impression other than the impression of existence occurs, it must be accompanied by the latter.

9. How much weight should one give to the location factor? Were Hume merely applying the position reached in "Of Abstract Ideas" to the idea of existence, it is difficult to see why he assigned the section on the ideas of existence and external existence to *Treatise I, ii* rather than *I, i*. Both parts concern ideas and are preliminary to *Treatise I, iii* and *iv*. One can understand why Hume isolated the five sections on space and time; very innovative views are introduced and defended in them. Adding the section on the ideas of existence and external existence is extremely peculiar if the central argument is merely a rehash of an earlier position. If, instead, the argument concerning the idea of existence is a new one based on special logical or metaphysical problems resulting from the ontologization of existence, locating it in *Treatise I, ii* makes perfect sense.

10. Why is the separate occurrence of existence impossible? The answer implied by Hume's own position is that since existence cannot be ontologized, there is no entity, existence, which could exist or fail to exist, which could be separable or inseparable from other things. The real question is why existence could not exist separately on the supposition that it is something and so could be represented by a distinct idea. See note 8 for some speculation on this arcane subject.
11. Hume's two models for understanding perceptions and the main difference between impressions and ideas are discussed in my unpublished paper, "On Impressions and Ideas."
12. At least on the model for impressions dominant in *Treatise* I, i and ii, impressions are not inherently and intrinsically representational.
13. Suppose human experience were such that every time one heard a sound, one smelled an odour. There would be two impressions, at some level of analysis. One impression would constantly accompany another. Suppose, again, that every time one had an idea of a sound, one smelled an odour, so that the latter impression would constantly accompany an idea. Here are two models for what it would be for an impression to constantly accompany other perceptions. I think *DA* is best understood along these lines. Hume can then be interpreted as arguing implicitly that in the case of existence, the accompaniment would have to be necessary, such that the impression which is existence would be inseparable from every impression and idea it accompanies. He proceeds to deny explicitly such an inseparable connection.
14. Dennis E. Bradford, "Hume on Existence," *International Studies in Philosophy* 15, no. 3 (1983): 1-12.
15. More precisely, separation from existence is intelligible and possible provided the doctrine of objects prior to existence can itself be made intelligible. I am not convinced it can. For example, do we really know what "object" signifies? Can their existence-independent status be made intelligible? Perhaps not.
16. Bradford (above, n. 14), 5, argues that doctrinal commitments in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* and the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* presuppose or imply the classification view of existence. He maintains, however, that Hume's position on existence in the *Treatise* is both different from and incompatible with the classification account. For the record, I am not convinced that Hume anywhere adopts the classification view. That, however, is another issue.
17. It seems to me that one of the deepest principles of Hume's metaphysics is that nothing exists necessarily. This claim is

difficult to prove because the one text in which it is explicitly and emphatically defended is a dialogue designed so as to block attributions of positions to Hume. See Cleanthes' critique of Demea's a priori proof of God's existence in David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (Indianapolis, 1947), pt. 9. The principle is, however, compatible with positions Hume takes on numerous issues and is presupposed by well-defined positions he takes on causation. Fully proving this contention obviously would require a paper or even, perhaps, a book.