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# Hume's Argument Concerning the Idea of Existence

John Bricke

In "Hume on the Idea of Existence"<sup>1</sup> Phillip Cummins offers an intricate and intriguing analysis of Hume's brief argument, at *Treatise* 1.2.6, concerning the idea of existence, an analysis that is, one wants to say, surely right on many of the essentials. He says relatively little, however, about a number of more preliminary matters, matters pertinent to the first of the several components he distinguishes in Hume's argument. I propose to focus on these preliminaries. Doing so will suggest a more direct route to Hume's conclusions than the one Cummins traces. My representation of Hume's argument, just as Cummins', makes the notion of separability central. But my representation of what I call Hume's Basic Premise eliminates the need for the problematic premise *m* on which Cummins has Hume's argument turn, and so it eliminates any need for the argument components—6A and 6B—that Cummins has Hume offer in *m*'s support.<sup>2</sup>

Hume argues from *some* claim or other about perceptions and existence—his Basic Premise—to the rejection of one philosophical theory (Cummins calls it the Distinctness Alternative, or DA) and the endorsement of another. The Basic Premise concerns *both* impressions and ideas. It concerns *all* impressions and ideas, or at least all those "of which we have any consciousness or memory."<sup>3</sup> The universally quantified Basic Premise is also, I suggest, a *biconditional*, one suited to be used in the proof of the biconditional that is the constructive conclusion to Hume's argument ("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" [T 67]). On the reasonable assumption that Hume views his constructive conclusion as a necessary truth there is also reason to assume the Basic Premise is offered as a *necessary* truth. We may take it, too, that the Basic Premise is one that Hume and his opponent are assumed to *share*: the controversy concerns not the Basic Premise but its philosophical elucidation.

Given this characterization of its structure and status, what is the Basic Premise's content? Of course it has to do with impressions and ideas, and with existence, but just how do they enter in? One source of difficulty here is the fact that Hume mentions a variety of psychological attitudes towards the existence of something or other, and it is not

immediately clear what role, if any, each of the several attitudes is designed to play in his argument. (He writes of something's being "conceiv'd as existent," of "attributing existence," of "assurance of being" [T 66], of what "we believe to be existent" [T 67].) Another source is the fact that he writes not only of attitudes towards the existence of something or another but also of the actual existence of those things, whatever they be: "every object, that is presented, must necessarily be existent" (T 67). (In writing this he raises, perhaps, the troublesome spectre of necessary existence.) A third source of difficulty concerns the impressions and ideas themselves. How are they to be understood? Is it *their* existence that is in question? How are they implicated in the various attitudes Hume mentions? Decisions on these matters of content must affect the interpretation not only of the Basic Premise but also of the Derivation Principle<sup>4</sup> and the Separability Principle<sup>5</sup> that, together with the Basic Premise, constitute the heart of Hume's argument.

It will encourage clarity if we take Hume's terms "impression" and "idea" narrowly. Ideas, as here understood, are neither concepts nor exercises of concepts; they are impression-like entities of a sort essential, if Hume is right, to the exercise of concepts. They, just as the impressions they resemble, may be said to be red or blue, round or square—more abstractly, to be F. To avoid assuming that these reified perceptions play an essential role in Hume's argument, however, let us introduce a more neutral notion, that of having an experience (including having an ideational experience<sup>6</sup>) with an experiential content. On this usage, one can have an experience as of an F, or as of an object that is F, the "as of" locution being used to introduce the experience's experiential content. Having such an experience does not entail the existence of an object that is F. Nor does having such an experience (whether or not ideational) entail one's having the concepts needed to characterize that experience's content. What is the connection between Hume's reified impressions and ideas and such experiences? Hume's theory of impressions and ideas (and of their relations to the subjects who have them) is best seen as a contribution to the philosophical analysis of having an experience with experiential content, an analysis that invokes entities (impressions, ideas) that are themselves F.

We are now better placed to canvass some alternative renderings of Hume's Basic Premise, each rendering taking the Premise to be a universally quantified biconditional concerned *in one way or another* with perceptions (impressions and ideas) and existence.

- (1) One has an experience as of something that is F iff there is something F (an impression, an idea) and one has it.<sup>7</sup>

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Biconditional (1) links perceptions and existence by introducing existential quantification over perceptions; it amounts to Hume's theory, mentioned above, of having an experience. It is, however, neither a tempting candidate for a necessary truth nor something with which Hume's opponent need be expected to agree. Despite Hume's own subscription to (1)—and despite remarks Cummins makes at several places<sup>8</sup>—(1) has, or so I suggest, nothing essential to do with the present question. The Basic Premise hasn't to do with the *existence* of impressions and ideas but with an existential element in the *content* of experience.

Focusing on existential content, let us consider:

- (2) One has an experience as of something that is F iff one has another experience as of that thing's existing.

Ignoring problems about the content ascribed on the right-hand side of the biconditional, there are at least two reasons not to take (2) as Hume's Basic Premise: there is no reason to think it true (let alone necessarily true); and—given the doubling of experiences it demands, and so the introduction of distinct impressions and ideas—there appears to be every reason for Hume to deny it to be true.

A third candidate also focuses on content:

- (3) One has an experience as of something that is F iff that experience is as of the existence of something that is F.

Candidate (3) does not explicitly incorporate (though it might be thought by Hume to demand) the reification of impressions and ideas. It introduces no doubling of distinct experiences (and so no doubling of distinct impressions and ideas). It begs the question neither against Hume nor against his opponent and so could be endorsed by each. Provided one countenances the existential content of experiences, (3) is plausibly taken to be true, indeed necessarily true. It links perceptions and existence by forging a link between the existential and other experiential content of experiences. It thus picks up one element in Hume's references to psychological attitudes (in particular that of "conceiving *as* existent") while avoiding dubious biconditionals invoking existential beliefs. If the presence of the expression "something" raises doubts, one should just notice the passages from Hume quoted just below. I submit that (3), or something quite close to (3), functions as Hume's Basic Premise.

With (3) as Basic Premise, the issue between Hume and his opponent can be sharply stated. Hume's opponent, the proponent of DA, maintains that the right-hand side of the biconditional introduces a

novel element of content, a feature of the object distinct from any introduced on the left-hand side. So, at least, I read DA's introduction (in Hume's words) of "a distinct impression" (T 66). Hume, by contrast, takes the content on the right to be identical with that on the left, and so takes an experience as of something that is F to be identical with an experience as of the existence of something that is F. So, at least, I read his claims that "the idea of existence ... must be the very same with the idea of the perception or object" (T 66) and that "[t]o reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other" (T 66-67).<sup>9</sup>

Given application of the Separability Principle to experiential content, however, the purported distinctness of the feature of existence is incompatible with the assumed necessary truth of the Basic Premise. Crucially, if DA is true—if existence is a distinct feature of experiential content—it is *not* in the relevant sense *necessary* that, if one has an experience as of something that is F, that experience is as of the existence of something that is F. It is *possible*, in the relevant sense, that one have an experience as of something that is F without that experience's being an experience as of the existence of something that is F. But this is precisely what (one half of) the Basic Premise rules out. Not surprisingly, then, Hume writes—in a passage to which Cummins pays only glancing attention<sup>10</sup>—that the proponent of DA is committed to something that "we may *without hesitation* conclude to be impossible" (T 67, emphasis added). What is that? Separability where, given the Basic Premise, separability is ruled out. This being so, DA must be rejected.<sup>11</sup>

Looking backwards, one can see why Hume requires, as Basic Premise, a shared necessary truth. Did DA not subscribe to the modality, Hume could not use his Separability Principle to subvert DA's claim of the distinctness of the existential element of experiential content. Did Hume not subscribe to the modality, he could not proceed to his own constructive alternative to DA.

To be sure, the conjunction of DA and the Separability Principle generates many, at least, of the sorts of difficulties to which Cummins draws our attention when, on Hume's behalf, he constructs argument components 5, 6A and 6B. In elaborating these Cummins has displayed some of the interesting implications of what Hume says. As a representation of Hume's five-paragraph argument, however, Cummins' representation is too tortuous to be true. Hume's argument is, as it seems to me, much more direct than Cummins suggests; there is much less than Cummins requires that must be brought to the surface. Attention to what I have termed the preliminaries is essential if one is to be tolerably confident in one's interpretation of Hume's actual argument. Insofar as this attention suggests that Hume's Basic

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Premise as I have rendered it it also reveals just how much of Hume's brief argument is right at the surface.

To be sure, there are substantial difficulties in Hume's constructive alternative to DA, his claim of identity of content on both sides of the biconditional. He has no machinery for explicating what he takes to be the ineliminably existential dimension of the content of experience. His account of the existential content of experience goes no way at all towards illuminating the concept of existence, thus no way at all towards illuminating the content of his provocative claim, made earlier in the *Treatise*, that the "ideas ... of existence and non-existence, ... are plainly resembling, as implying *both of them* an idea of the object" (T 15, emphasis added). It goes without saying that one can question the *assumption* that it makes good sense to speak of an existential element in specifically experiential content. Whatever the assumption's merits, however, it *is* the assumption on which Hume's argument, as I have represented it, turns.

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1. Phillip D. Cummins, "Hume on the Idea of Existence," *Hume Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 1991): 61-82. Professor Cummins' paper was presented to the Hume Society meeting in conjunction with the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, April, 1991. My own paper constitutes a slightly revised version of comments read on that occasion.
2. Premise *m*: "If a distinct impression of existence accompanied every other perception, then it would be inseparably conjoined with each of those perceptions" (Cummins, 66). Argument components of 6A and 6B are given at Cummins, 71.
3. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1978; reprint, Oxford, 1987), 66 (hereafter cited as "T").
4. Omitting needed qualifications Hume refers to "the principle, that every idea arises from a similar impression" (T 66).
5. In one of its many formulations Hume's Separability Principle reads: "whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and ... whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination" (T 18).
6. By this inclusion I bypass Hume's use of his Derivation Principle.
7. Here I omit consideration of what seems a still more basic claim: one has an experience iff one has an experience as of something that is F.
8. Cummins (above, n. 1), 65, 69, 71, 75, 77.

9. Here I ignore questions concerning Hume's views about the relationships between (as we may say) experiential and either conceptual or propositional content.
10. Cummins (above, n. 1), 70.
11. Having completed this argument against DA, Hume argues (T 67) that recourse to a doctrine of distinctions of reason will be unavailing.