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# Hume on the Abstract Idea of Existence: Comments on Cummins' "Hume on the Idea of Existence"<sup>1</sup>

*Fred Wilson*

Hume's views on the concept of existence: this is one of the more obscure parts of Hume's philosophy. Professor Cummins has done a valuable service simply by trying to unravel some of the puzzles; it is still more valuable for shedding as much light as it does on the issues. There are nonetheless problems with the interpretation that he develops, and I would like to bring out some of these. I will address three questions:

- (a) What, more precisely, is the (abstract) idea of existence?
- (b) What is the notion of "necessity" as Hume would use it in connection with the notion that something exists "necessarily," or, contrarily, "contingently"?
- (c) Does it follow from the fact that whatever thing we conceive we conceive as existent that every thing necessarily exists?

In order to answer these questions something will have to be said about Hume's doctrine of abstract ideas. But on all these issues, Hume is often not so much inadequate as incomplete; and I shall suggest that a number of points can be illuminated by looking at the historical context that Hume himself could take for granted. The upshot will not be that Hume's views are unproblematic, but only that they are perhaps less problematic than Professor Cummins makes out.

## **I. Abstract Ideas**

In many respects, Hume's doctrine of ideas is fairly traditional. We think in terms of ideas. In particular, our capacity to think generally, and to use general terms, is a matter of having abstract ideas. In this, Hume follows the views of his predecessors such as Locke, Descartes and the Port Royal logicians. Hume also adopts the principle that what is conceivable is possible. Again, he follows the same tradition of Locke,

Descartes and the Port Royal logicians. Where Hume differs from his predecessors is in his account of what precisely an abstract is.

For Hume's predecessors, one forms an abstract idea by separation. Thus, for Locke, forming ideas by abstraction consists in "separating them from all other Ideas that accompany them in their real existence."<sup>2</sup> This sort of separation is the mechanism by which "the Mind makes the particular Ideas, received from particular Objects, to become general" (*Essay*, 2.11.9). The Port Royal logicians make the same point: abstraction occurs with respect to "choses ... composées" when one "les considérant par parties, et comme par les diverses faces qu'elles peuvent recevoir." In abstraction what is thus known is considered separately from the whole; either one considers "les parties séparément" in the case of "parties intégrantes," or one "peut séparer les choses en divers modes," or, finally, "quand une même chose ayant divers attributs, on pense à l'un sans penser à l'autre."<sup>3</sup> The former occurs when, for example, we separate in thought the parts of the body. This is the simplest form of abstraction. Berkeley has no problems with this notion: "I will not deny I can abstract, if that may properly be called *abstraction*, which extends only to the conceiving separately such objects, as is possible may really exist or be actually perceived asunder."<sup>4</sup> Neither does Hume have problems with this notion; it is the basis of his—and Berkeley's—view that ideas are either simple or complex and that some of the complex ideas are a result of our combining simple parts in ways that are not found in reality, as, for example, in our idea of the New Jerusalem.<sup>5</sup>

It is the other two sorts of abstraction that are more problematic. Consider the first of these two forms of abstraction. We begin with simple ideas of sensation, for example, white (*Essay*, 2.3.1). One forms the abstract idea of white by separating the property white from the other qualities with which it is conjoined in the white particulars, for example, snow or milk (*Essay*, 2.21.73), that are given in sense experience. The resulting idea is distinct from other ideas, for example, blue or heat (*Essay*, 2.12.1). The example given by Nicole and Arnauld is that of the geometers who explore the idea of three-dimensional space by considering first length alone, then area, and finally volumes or solids (which is the same, for these Cartesians as "corps," body) (*Logique*, 1.5). This is one form of separation. By this means one forms abstract ideas of species. But whatever is red is coloured. Here we have not only the abstract idea of a species but also an abstract idea of a genus. The method of forming the abstract ideas of genera is rather different. The mind, "so to make other yet more general Ideas, that may comprehend different sorts [species], ... leaves out those Qualities that distinguish them..." (*Essay*, 3.6.32). That is, one forms the abstract idea of a genus from the ideas of several qualities by separating the genus

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from the species. Thus, one forms the idea of being coloured by separating the property of being coloured from such properties as white, red, etc., which are, of course, themselves abstract ideas. One forms the abstract idea of an equilateral triangle by separating this property from the particular equilateral triangles.

Que si je passe plus avant, et que ne m'arrêtant plus à cette égalité de lignes, je considère seulement que c'est une figure terminée par trois lignes droites, je me formerai une idée qui peut représenter toutes sortes des triangles. Si ensuite, ne m'arrêtant point au nombre des lignes, je considère seulement que c'est une surface plate, bornée par des lignes droites, l'idée que je formerai pourra représenter toutes les figures rectilignes, et ainsi je puis monter de degré en degré jusqu'à l'extension. (*Logique*, 1.5)

Thus, one forms the abstract idea of extension, or of being extended, by separating the property of extension from the property of triangle or circle or some other figure, that is, from these abstract ideas. These abstract general or universal ideas signify many particulars by signifying properties in those particulars. But these properties do not exist independently of those particulars. These ideas do not therefore represent or signify things that can exist as such, independently of particulars. "General and Universal ... belong not to the real existence of Things ... their general Nature being nothing but the Capacity they are put into by the Understanding, of signifying or representing many particulars" (*Essay*, 3.3.11). Or again,

Quoique toutes les choses qui existent soient singulières, néanmoins, par le moyen des abstractions que nous venons d'expliquer, nous ne laissons pas d'avoir tous plusieurs sorts d'idées, dont les unes ne nous représentent qu'une seule chose, ... et les autres en peuvent également représenter plusieurs, comme lorsque quelqu'un conçoit un triangle sans y considérer autre chose, sinon que c'est une figure à trois lignes et à trois angles; l'idée qu'il en a formée peut lui servir à concevoir tous les autres triangles. (*Logique*, 1.6)

In general, one forms the abstract idea of a specific property by separating that specific property from the concrete particulars presented to one; and one forms generic abstract ideas by separating the generic property from the specific.

This view is challenged by Hume, using an argument first deployed by Berkeley in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (Introduction, secs. 8-10). The three propositions,

- (a) (Necessarily) whatever exists is particular,
- (b) Whatever is possible in thought is possible in reality,
- (c) Abstract ideas are formed by separating specific and generic properties from existing particulars,<sup>6</sup>

are inconsistent. As Hume puts it,

[T]his is a principle generally receiv'd in philosophy, that every thing in nature is individual, and that 'tis utterly absurd to suppose a triangle really existent, which has no precise proportion of sides and angles. If this therefore be absurd in *fact and reality*, it must also be absurd in *idea*; since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. (T 19-20)

Berkeley and Hume conclude: so much the worse for the traditional doctrine of abstract ideas. Again as Hume puts it,

Now as 'tis impossible to form an idea of an object, that is possest of quantity and quality, and yet is possest of no precise degree of either; it follows, that there is an equal impossibility of forming an idea, that is not limited or confin'd in both these particulars. Abstract ideas are therefore in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation. (T 20)

Berkeley leaves it at that. But this leaves him without any account how words come to be general, since the tradition understood this in terms of words being associated with abstract ideas. Hume goes beyond Berkeley in attempting to provide a positive account of how words come to be general, that is, in effect, a radically revised account of abstract ideas, one that is not subject to the criticism that demolishes the traditional doctrine. In particular, Hume allows that we do in fact have ideas—clearly, *abstract ideas*—of such things as *existence*:

There is no impression nor idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceiv'd as existent;

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and 'tis evident, that from this consciousness the most perfect idea and assurance of *being* is deriv'd. (T 66)

In holding this position Hume follows Locke who also holds that existence is an idea that is

suggested to the understanding, by every object without, and every idea within. (*Essay*, 2.7.7)

Before Locke there was Descartes, who holds that

[e]xistence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of any thing except as existing.<sup>7</sup>

But Hume, unlike Locke and the Cartesians, does not hold that we form this idea of existence by separation. Rather, he proposes a different thesis concerning the formation of abstract ideas, an alternative account that does not face the difficulties that he and Berkeley faced against the doctrine of abstraction by separation.

The problem to be solved is how an idea, that is, an image, that is particular becomes abstract, or, in Locke's terms, how it acquires "the Capacity ... of signifying or representing many particulars" (*Essay*, 3.3.11). It cannot signify them by their all being present to the mind when the particular idea that represents them all is present, since "the capacity of the mind be not infinite" (T 18). Hume's solution turns on arguing that the ideas and impressions that an abstract idea signifies "are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power" (T 20). This capacity is one that is acquired or learned through a process of association. Thus, Hume's positive account of abstract ideas depends upon his associationist psychology.<sup>8</sup> Just as our notion of causation is understood in terms of association based on the relation of contiguity, so abstract ideas are understood in terms of association based on the relation of resemblance.<sup>9</sup> Ideas (images) and impressions that resemble each other in a certain respect, say in being red or in being coloured or in being extended, will through the mechanisms of association become so associated in thought that any one of them can introduce another member of the set. At the same time, a word (that is, a sound or mark) comes to be associated with ideas and impressions insofar as they are associated with one another via some resemblance relation. Thus, 'red' comes to be associated with all members of the resemblance class of red impressions and ideas, 'coloured' comes to be associated with all members of the resemblance class of coloured impressions and ideas, and so on. When we encounter an impression or contemplate an idea

(image) which is a member of the same resemblance class, that idea or impression introduces the word—the general term—that refers indifferently to each and every member of the resemblance class.

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them. After we have acquired a custom of this kind, the hearing of that name revives the idea of one of these objects, and makes the imagination conceive it with all its particular circumstances and proportions. But as the same word is suppos'd to have been frequently applied to other individuals, that are different in many respects from that idea, which is immediately present to the mind; the word not being able to revive the idea of all these individuals, only touches the soul, if I may be allow'd so to speak, and revives that custom, which we have acquir'd by surveying them. They are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power; nor do we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity. The word raises up an individual idea, along with a certain custom; and that custom produces any other individual one, for which we may have occasion. (T 20-21)

The mechanisms of association provide the explanation of how a word becomes general. The abstract idea just is the members of the resemblance class *qua* habitually associated with each other, or, more accurately, the associated resemblance class insofar as the general term has become associated with it. The parts of the idea, those impressions and ideas that fall under it, are the members of that class—though to be sure when the idea is before the mind, instancing a use of the general term, those parts are present not actually but *only potentially or dispositionally*, ready to be recovered through association as the occasion permits or requires.

When one judges that, say, whatever is extended is coloured, then one will have before the mind two abstract ideas, one the idea of being extended and the other the idea of being coloured, and, as in the tradition, these will be joined in making the affirmative universal judgement. Since these abstract ideas as such are habits or dispositions, they are of course as such not present to consciousness; rather, what is before the mind are particular ideas that are parts of the two abstract ideas, that is, particulars that have, through

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associations based on resemblance, come to be connected in thought with the use of general terms. Thus, it will be two particular ideas that are joined in the judgement, one a particular idea associated with the general term 'coloured' and the other a particular idea associated with the general term 'extension'. Or, even more likely, it will be *one* particular idea that is before the mind. For, a particular idea that is in the resemblance class of coloured objects will also be a particular idea that is in the resemblance class of extended objects. That means that both abstract ideas can be represented in consciousness by one and the same particular idea, with that idea associated with the two general terms. The judgement that whatever is extended is coloured will not consist of a compound idea, made up of two particular ideas, but will, rather, consist of a single idea without distinct parts, this single idea representing in consciousness the two abstract ideas of being coloured and being extended.

Hume explicitly recognizes this last point when he argues that the traditional division of mental acts into *conception*, *judgement* and *reasoning* is mistaken. Conception is supposed to consist in the survey of one or more ideas, judgement in the joining or separating of two ideas, and reasoning the joining or separating of ideas by means of intermediary ideas. Hume points out:

For *first*, 'tis far from being true, that in every judgment, which we form, we unite two different ideas; since in that proposition, *God is*, or indeed any other, which regards existence, the idea of existence is no distinct idea, which we unite with that of the object, and which is capable of forming a compound idea by the union. *Secondly*, As we can thus form a proposition, which contains only one idea, so we may exert our reason without employing more than two ideas, and without having recourse to a third to serve as a medium betwixt them. We infer a cause immediately from its effect; and this inference is not only a true species of reasoning, but the strongest of all others, and more convincing than when we interpose another idea to connect the two extremes. (T 96-97, n. 1)

The point about inference and reasoning is of course but a restatement of the standard Lockean critique of the Aristotelian idea that all scientific inference is syllogistic.<sup>10</sup> But for present purposes what is important is Hume's claim that we can similarly have a proposition or judgement "which contains only one idea." The example that Hume uses is instructive, too. This example is *God is*. Here we have the idea of *God*; since *God* is a particular, this must be a particular idea. In the proposition *God is* we join this particular idea to the abstract idea of

*existence*. That abstract idea will be represented in consciousness by a particular idea. This particular idea will not be another, distinct particular idea that we attempt to join to the idea of *God*. It will, rather, be the same idea of *God*. That is, the judgement that *God exists* will appear in consciousness as a single rather than a compound idea.<sup>11</sup>

This departure from the traditional doctrine about the nature of judgement does not reflect a rejection of the traditional doctrine that judgement consists of joining and separating abstract ideas, but rather is a consequence of Hume's rethinking of the nature of abstract ideas, and his construal of them as associational habits represented indifferently in consciousness by any member of a resemblance class of ideas.

Hume's radical departure from the tradition does not consist in his rejection of the doctrine of abstract ideas but rather in the account that he gives of those ideas. This account is based on two points: one, the existence of different relations of resemblance, and two, the mechanisms of association.<sup>12</sup>

## II. The (Abstract) Idea of Existence

We can now ask what is our idea, that is, our abstract idea, of existence.

Hume tells us that "[t]here is no impression nor idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceiv'd as existent" (T 66). As we have seen, Hume here follows Locke, who holds that *existence* is an *idea* that is "suggested to the Understanding, by every Object without, and every Idea within. When Ideas are in our Minds, we consider them as being actually there, as well as we consider things to be actually without us; which is, that they exist, or have Existence" (*Essay*, 2.7.7), and Descartes, who holds that "Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing" (*Replies*, 1:117). This is the thesis which, as Cummins points out ("Idea of Existence," 65), Hume uses as an unstated premise in his argument that there is no distinct impression of existence. Locke unfortunately adds nothing to this bald statement. Equally unfortunately, this leaves real problems. These are what Hume aims to address in his discussion of existence.

The doctrine of Locke and Descartes is that abstraction is a result of separation. It follows that the abstract idea of existence is obtained by separating existence from some existent thing. But Locke also holds that what is possible in thought is possible in reality. So it would seem to be possible to separate in reality a thing from its existence. It would seem possible to have in reality things that do not exist! Equally, if there is a separable idea of existence, then one will be able to confer existence on all sorts of things which we have no reason to think exist, as Berkeley saw. In his defence of idealism, Berkeley points out that

the defender of material objects may retreat from the claim that the external cause of our sensations is a material substance to the weaker claim that it is an "unknown *Somewhat*" devoid of positive characteristics of the sort we know, something that is "inert, thoughtless, indivisible, immovable, unextended, existing in no place." Berkeley replies that if this be the concept of matter, then it is no different from the concept of nothing, and can have no more explanatory power than the latter (*Human Knowledge*, sec. 80). Berkeley then goes on to consider the possibility that his opponent will claim that the concept of matter that he advances is not that of nothing, for "in the foresaid definition is included what doth sufficiently distinguish it from nothing—the positive abstract idea of *quiddity, entity, or existence*" (*Human Knowledge*, sec. 81). If existence were an entity that non-separately accompanied all other entities that one experienced but could be separated in thought, then the world could be populated with all sorts of unacceptable entities.<sup>13</sup> Berkeley thus recognizes the dangers of having a separable idea of existence!<sup>14</sup>

Hume makes the same sort of point. Judgements to the effect that a thing exists cannot, he argues, consist of joining two separable ideas, one of the thing and one of existence. He offers two reasons, one concerning the nature of our idea of existence, and the second concerning the absurd consequences of supposing judgements of existence are of this sort. He concludes that a judgement of existence therefore consists not of joining the idea of thing to another idea but simply affirming the thing, construing affirming a species of (cognitive) mental act (T 623).

Hume's first argument is that

[w]e have no abstract idea of existence, distinguishable and separable from the idea of particular objects. 'Tis impossible, therefore, that this idea of existence can be annex'd to the idea of any object, or form the difference betwixt a simple conception and belief. (T 623)

Hume, to provide himself with the premise he needs, is here relying upon the argument that Cummins is addressing—of which more in a moment. Note, however, that Hume is not here denying that we have an abstract idea of existence, only that we have an abstract idea of existence that is separable from the idea of particular objects or things. It is this, I shall be suggesting, that is the conclusion Hume wishes to draw from the argument that is Cummins' concern.

For our immediate purposes, however, it is Hume's second argument that is relevant; it is this that parallels Berkeley's argument

against a separable idea of existence, by appeal to the absurd consequences that would result if one supposed otherwise.

The mind has the command over all its ideas, and can separate, unite, mix, and very them, as it pleases; so that if belief consisted merely in a new idea, annex'd to the conception, it wou'd be in a man's power to believe what he pleas'd. (T 623-24)

One could believe whatever absurdities one wanted, including the entities to which Berkeley objects.

Berkeley does allow that the traditional defenders of abstract ideas will claim, as does Locke, to have such an idea of existence. But that idea, like all other abstract ideas, is subject to Berkeley's critique.

I own, indeed, that those who pretend to the faculty of framing abstract general ideas do talk as if they had such an idea, which is, say they, the most abstract and general notion of all: that is to me the most incomprehensible of all others. (*Human Knowledge*, sec. 81)

*Existence* is just not the *sort* of entity that one could run across separately or even separably existing in experience:

[H]ow ready soever I may be to acknowledge the scantiness of my comprehension, with regard to the endless variety of spirits and ideas that may possibly exist, yet for any one to pretend to a *notion* of Entity or Existence, *abstracted* from *spirit* and *idea*, from perceived and being perceived, is, I suspect, a downright repugnancy and trifling with words. (*Human Knowledge*, sec. 81)

However, where Berkeley rejects abstract ideas, Hume does not. To the contrary, he has his own doctrine of abstract ideas, and is prepared to allow that there is indeed an abstract idea of existence. But he also wishes to avoid the sort of problem to which Berkeley directs our attention; that is the thrust of the second of the two arguments we have just noted. So the question for Hume is this: What sort of abstraction is involved in forming the idea of existence? Locke does not tell us. Is it the unproblematic kind of abstraction in which an integral part is separated from a whole? Or is it the other sort of abstraction in which a mode or genus purports to be separated from a thing? The argument that Cummins examines in detail aims to show that it is not the former sort of abstraction: it is not "deriv'd from a distinct

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impression, conjoin'd with every perception or object of our thought" (T 66).<sup>15</sup> It is, rather, the other sort of abstraction, that obtains when we form the abstract idea of a species apart from particular things, or a genus apart from a species. Only, of course, for Hume this sort of abstraction is not a matter of separation but one of association based on resemblance. For, the species is *not* separable from the particular nor the genus from the species. What we have, therefore, is an "abstract idea of existence" but one which is *not* "distinguishable and separable from the idea of particular objects" (T 623). Thus, "[w]hatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent" (T 67).

However, this does not solve all the problems. For if, as Hume concludes, "[w]hatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent," then it would seem, as Cummins points out ("Idea of Existence," 70), that we must take Hume to hold that everything necessarily exists, which hardly fits with the customary, and textually well-supported, view that for Hume no matter of fact or existence can be logically true. In order to deal with this issue, it is necessary to go on to see more precisely what is the abstract idea of existence.

Begin again with Locke. The latter contrasts ideas that come by one sense, for example, our ideas of colours or of sounds (*Essay*, 2.3.1), with those that come by several senses, for example, extension (*Essay*, 2.5), with those that come by reflection, for example, perception or volition (*Essay*, 2.6.2), with, finally, those that come by both sensation and reflection (*Essay*, 2.7.1). Among the last are the ideas of pleasure and pain (*Essay*, 2.7.2) but also duration and, of present interest, *existence* (*Essay*, 2.7.1, 7). The point to be noticed is that, in spite of the Kantian injunction that we have appropriated that existence is not a predicate, here it is in fact treated as such, parallel to such ordinary predicates as colours, shapes or forms of thought. This is of course part of a long tradition. The *Port Royal Logic* takes a *thing* (*chose*) to be that which "l'on conçoit comme subsistant par soi-même"; it is what "l'on appelle autrement substance." The *manner of a thing* (*manière de chose*) "étant conçu dans la chose, et comme ne pouvant subsister sans elle, la détermine à être d'une certaine façon." This manner of being can be understood as either a mode, attribute or quality (*Logique*, 1.2). The *Logic* does not elaborate on the distinction between mode, attribute and quality, but we find the relevant point in Descartes' *Principles of Philosophy*.<sup>16</sup>

By *mode* ... we understand exactly the same as what is elsewhere meant by an *attribute* or *quality*. But we employ the term *mode* when we are thinking of a substance as being affected or modified; when the modification enables the substance to be designated as a substance of such and such a

kind, we use the term *quality*; and finally, when we are simply thinking in a more general way of what is in a substance, we use the term *attribute*. Hence we do not, strictly speaking, say that there are modes or qualities in God, but simply attributes, since in the case of God, any variation is unintelligible. (*Principles*, 1.56)

In created things, the attributes are, as it were, the modes that do not vary: "in the case of created things, that which always remains unmodified—for example existence or duration in a thing which exists and endures—should be called not a quality but an attribute" (*Principles*, 1.56). The Cartesians thus include existence among the modes and attributes of things. As for Locke, so for the Cartesians, extension is a predicate, alongside extension, which is the principal attribute of body, alongside thought, which is the principal attribute of mind, alongside particular shapes and motions, which are modes of bodies, and alongside imagination and volition, which are modes of minds (*Principles*, 1.53).

Descartes speaks of thought and extension having different modes; these are the species under the genus.

There are various modes of thought such as understanding, imagination, memory, volition, and so on; and there are various modes of extension, such as all shapes, the positions of parts and the motions of the parts. (*Principles*, 1.65)

Locke speaks in the same way. Thus, volition and judging are "modes of thinking" (*Essay*, 2.19.1, 2); and among the "simple modes of space" is "each different distance" as well as "figure" and the "vast number of different figures" (*Essay*, 2.12.4, 5). To these Locke adds the "modes of sounds" and the "modes of colours," the various sensory modalities that the Cartesians tended to ignore (*Essay*, 2.18). The modes of extension or of thinking are the modes of those things or substances which are extended or thinking. More generally, a thing falling under the genus will be modified by one of the species of that genus.

The modes are, in the language of Aristotle, those entities that are "present in" a substance (*Categories*, 1a20-25).<sup>17</sup> A thing or substance is said to *be* according to what is present in it. Thus, if a thing has red present in it as a modification then that thing *is* red, or if it is modified by a circular shape then it *is* circular. The modifications of a thing constitute its *being*, that is, *the ways in which it is*. But there are restrictions on the way in which a thing is; it cannot be just anything at all. Thus, if a thing is of a certain genus but not another it will have modifications of the one sort and not those of the other. As Aristotle put

it, "being falls immediately into genera" (*Metaphysics*, 1004a4-5). Within the specific metaphysics of Aristotle, different genera may share qualities—both Peter Rabbit and Socrates can be modified by whiteness; Locke holds the same view, though the two philosophers give different accounts of the essences or forms of things: for Aristotle they have a real basis in substances, whereas for Locke they are, so far as humans are concerned, nominal. For Descartes, in contrast, things which are of different genera cannot have modifications falling under a different genus: an extended thing has the modifications of extension but not those of thought, that is, of thinking things. In any case, however, species and genera indicate *ways of being*: in Aristotle's words, "'white' indicates quality and nothing further, but species and genus determine the quality with reference to a substance: they signify substance qualitatively determined" (*Categories*, 3b18-20).

Now, the difference between a thing that is something and a thing that is nothing is of course that the former exists while the latter does not. What is to be noted is that what it means to say that something is nothing is that it has no being. "Nothingness possesses no attributes or qualities," says Descartes (*Principles*, 1.11). For Locke, "Non-entity" is "the absence of all Being" (*Essay*, 4.10.3). Following this tradition, Samuel Clarke tells us in his Boyle Lectures that "Nothing is That which has No Properties or Modes whatsoever. That is to say, 'tis That of which nothing can truly be affirmed, and of which Every thing can truly be denied."<sup>18</sup> *Existence is the presence of being, and non-existence is the absence of being.*<sup>19</sup> To say that *x exists* is to say that *x has being*, that is, that

there is a (specific) quality that *x* has;

or, equivalently,

there is a (specific) quality *f* such that *x* is *f*.

But of course, to say that *x is extended* is to say that

there is a (specific) quality *f* such that *f* is a mode of extension and *x* is *f*;

and to say that *x is a thinking thing* is to say that

there is a (specific) quality *f* such that *f* is a mode of thought and *s* is *f*.

Extension, thought, etc., are the genera into which being "immediately divides." To predicate these of things is to assert that these things *are* in certain ways, that is, that there are qualities are certain sorts present in those things. Similarly, to predicate being of things is to assert that these things *are*, though not that they are in any certain ways; it is to assert, that is, that there are specific qualities present in those things while not asserting precisely what that specific sort is which those qualities are. *Being or existence* is thus the genus that can be predicated of all things, and includes all less comprehensive genera within it.

Thus, for the tradition within which Hume is located, being or existence is quite reasonably taken, *pace* Kant,<sup>20</sup> to be a predicate: it is a genus parallel to such genera as extension or thought differing only in being that genus that transcends all others;<sup>21</sup> it is that genus which comprehends all things and includes within itself all lesser genera.

All things of which we are aware are qualified or modified; they all resemble each other in this respect. This resemblance relation is the basis of the association that constitutes the idea of existence.

We can conclude that Hume's argument to the conclusion, that "[w]hatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent," is part of his more general argument concerning abstract ideas. It is in fact, simply Hume's views about the latter applied to the case of existence.

But what about *things*? What is the idea of a thing? Well, as we have seen, the *Port Royal Logic* takes a *thing* (chose) to be that which "l'on conçoit comme subsistant par soi-même"; it is what "l'on appelle autrement substance" (*Logique*, 1.2). A *thing* is thus something that has being, that is, exists, but which also has the further property of being independent: a thing is an independent existent. Hume follows Arnauld and Nicole in this: as he puts it, "the definition of a substance is *something which may exist by itself*" (T 233), that is, separately from all other things. But Hume holds that what is different or distinct is distinguishable and that what is distinguishable is separable (T 18). So entities that are distinct are separable and therefore may exist by themselves; they are therefore substances, according to this definition. Now, Hume has also systematically argued that perceptions or impressions are independent of each other. He draws the appropriate conclusion:

since all our perceptions are different from each other, and from every thing else in the universe, they are also distinct and separable, and may be consider'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing else to support their existence. They are, therefore, substances, as far as this definition explains a substance. (T 233)

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The entities that satisfy this definition are impressions and images (ideas). The impressions are all qualified entities; we have no impression that does not have determinate or specific characteristics. The entities that are to be reckoned substances are therefore all qualified and therefore existent. They resemble each other in this respect. But in addition, these entities also resemble each other in being independent or separable. It is this relation of resemblance that is the basis of the association that constitutes the idea of a thing.

Here, then, we have two abstract ideas. But note that every idea or impression that is a member of the resemblance class for the abstract idea of a thing is also a member of the resemblance class for the abstract idea of existence. The everything falling under the former idea also falls under the latter. More strongly, it would seem that the two are inseparable: "Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent." It follows that *necessarily* every thing exists.<sup>22</sup> Conversely, the idea of a *non-existent thing* is self-contradictory. Hume makes this point when he says that

no two ideas are in themselves contrary, except those of existence and non-existence, which are plainly resembling, as implying both of them an idea of the object; tho' the latter excludes the object from all times and places, in which it is supposed not to exist. (T 15)

The judgement that an object exists or is existent consists in joining the idea of an object to the abstract idea of existence (this judgement may well, as we saw above, consist of a single particular idea). In contrast, the judgement that an object is non-existent consists in separating the idea of an object from the abstract idea of existence. But the idea of an object will be represented in consciousness by a particular idea, and there is no particular idea that is not of some specific kind or other; a particular idea is itself an object with certain modifications. However, an object modified is an object that exists, since, as we have argued, to exist just is to be modified. So in the judgement of non-existence one is attempting to separate from the idea of existence an idea that is necessarily tied to the idea of existence. But that, as we said, is to try the impossible; it is self-contradictory.

But to say this is hardly yet to understand what Hume has in mind; it does seem odd that *necessarily* every thing exists. We still require some elaboration: What is the relevant sense of *necessity*?

### III. Necessity

According to Hume, "no matter of fact is capable of being demonstrated" (T 463). This seems to conflict with the claim that we are examining

that "[w]hatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent." But the conflict is not so clear once we begin to separate the relevant notions of 'necessarily'. Descartes agreed with Hume that whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent: in that sense, *necessarily* every thing exists.

Existence is contained in the idea or concept of every single thing, since we cannot conceive of anything except as existing.

But then Descartes hastens to add that

[p]ossible or contingent existence is contained in the concept of a limited thing, whereas necessary and perfect existence is contained in the concept of a supremely perfect being. (*Replies*, 1:117)

Thus, while necessarily every thing exists, not every thing is a necessary existent.

Where Hume disagrees with Descartes is in holding that there is one thing the existence of which can be demonstrated. This is what he is insisting upon when he asserts that "no matter of fact is capable of being demonstrated." To insist upon this is possible while agreeing with Descartes that necessarily every thing exists in the sense that whatever thing we conceive we conceive it as existent.

To get at this point we must look at the philosophers with whom Hume was disagreeing when he held that no matter of fact could be demonstrated, that is, philosophers like Descartes, Locke and Samuel Clarke who held that it is possible to demonstrate the existence of at least one being.

Thus, Clarke argues that ordinary things are not self-caused, but causally dependent upon certain preceding beings. But these latter are also causally dependent, and not self-caused. Such a chain of beings causally dependent upon other beings does not contain within itself something that could account for its own existence. If there is nothing that could account for its own existence, then

it was originally equally possible, that from Eternity there should never have existed a Succession of changeable and dependent Beings. Which being supposed; then, What is it that has from Eternity determined such a Succession of Beings to exist, rather than that from Eternity there should never have existed any thing at all? Necessity it was not; because it was equally possible, in this Supposition, that they should not have existed at all. Chance, is nothing but a mere Word,

without any signification. And Other Being 'tis supposed there was none, to determine the Existence of these. Their Existence therefore was determined by Nothing; neither by any Necessity in the nature of the Things themselves, because 'tis supposed that none of them are Self-existent; nor by any other Being, because no other is supposed to Exist. That is to say; Of two equally possible things, (viz. whether any thing or nothing should from Eternity have existed,) the one determined rather than the other, absolutely by Nothing: Which is an express Contradiction. (*Discourse*, 13-14)

From this Clarke concludes that

consequently ... there must on the Contrary, of Necessity have existed from Eternity, some One Immutable and Independent Being. (*Discourse*, 14)

Locke uses the same argument. We know by intuitive certainty, he tells us, that "bare nothing can no more produce any real Being, than it can be equal to two right Angles." He draws Clarke's conclusion:

If therefore we know there is some real Being, and that Non-entity cannot produce any real Being, it is an evident demonstration, that from Eternity there must have been something; Since what was not from Eternity, had a Beginning; and what had a Beginning, must be produced by something else. (*Essay*, 4.10.3)

The argument that Locke and Clarke here offer is that we cannot suppose that the chain of dependent beings is caused by nothing. For, as nothing has no properties, and therefore in particular no causal powers, it is contradictory to suppose that the chain is caused by nothing. It must therefore be caused by something. But, as Hume points out, this is to misrepresent the situation. What we have to suppose is *not* that

this thing is caused by nothing,

but *rather* that

(Ⓞ) there is no cause for this thing,

and *this* is *not* self-contradictory:

when we exclude all causes we really do exclude them, and neither suppose nothing nor the object itself to be the causes of the existence; and consequently can draw no argument from the absurdity of these suppositions to prove the absurdity of that exclusion. (T 81)

So much the worse for the argument of Locke and Clarke.

Nonetheless, the conclusion that Locke and Clarke draw from their argument is that a *necessary being* exists. The argument has been from the "Impossibility of every Thing's being dependent" (*Discourse*, 15), to the existence of an "Independent Being" (*Discourse*, 14). This independent being *exists necessarily*: "That unchangeable and independent Being, which has existed from Eternity, without any external Cause of its Existence; must be Self-Existent, that is, Necessarily-existing" (*Discourse*, 14).

For whatever Exists, must either have come into Being out of Nothing, absolutely without Cause; or it must have been produced by some External Cause; or it must be Self-Existent. Now to arise out of Nothing, absolutely without any Cause; has already been shown to be a plain Contradiction. To have been produced by some External Cause, cannot possibly be true of every thing; but something must have existed Eternally and Independently; As has likewise been shown already. It remains therefore, that That Being which has existed Independently from Eternity, must of Necessity be Self-existent. (*Discourse*, 14)

The point to be noticed is that the notions of "necessity" and, correspondingly, of "contingency" are part of the context of *causal discourse*. The "Necessarily-existing" is the "Self-Existent" in the sense that it itself is the "cause of its existence," and, indeed, more strongly, since the self-existent is eternal, *the necessarily-existent has the sort of causal power that creates its own being and can prevent any other cause from destroying that being*. That is, *the necessarily-existent has a certain special sort of causal power; and this causal power is such that it is a contradiction to suppose that a thing has it and yet does not exist*. In parallel, the contingently-existent has the sort of causal power that cannot create its own being nor can prevent all other causes from destroying that being. The contingently-existent also has a certain sort of causal power, namely a power such that there is no contradiction in supposing that it has this power and yet does not exist. Thus, *the notions of necessity and contingency refer to different kinds of cause and causal power and not to different kinds of existence; those notions refer*

to a relation between a thing and its existence but that relation is not merely that of a thing modified to its modes but rather causal. Hence, to conceive of some thing as necessarily existent is to conceive it as existent and to conceive that existence as created by a sort of causal power the presence of which is logically incompatible with the non-existence of the thing; while to conceive of some thing as contingently existent is to conceive it as existent and to conceive that existence as created by a sort of causal power the presence of which is logically compatible with the non-existence of the thing.<sup>23</sup>

What we should note is that we have *two* notions involved in the idea of *necessary existence*. *One* is the notion of causal power. The *second* is the notion of a logical contradiction. The necessarily existent is a thing such that (1) its *causal power* is of a certain special sort, to wit, the sort of power in which (2) having that power is *logically incompatible* with that thing not existing, that is, the thing is conceived as having a causal power such that one cannot conceive a thing having that power not existing. As Clarke puts it,

[the necessity of God's existence] must antecedently force it self upon us, whether we will or no, even when we are endeavouring to suppose that no such Being Exists. For Example: When we are endeavouring to suppose, that there is no Being in the Universe that exists Necessarily; we always find in our Minds ... some Ideas, as of Infinity and Eternity; which to remove, that is, to suppose that there is no Being, no Substance in the Universe, to which these Attributes or Modes of Existence are necessarily inherent, is a Contradiction in the very Terms. (*Discourse*, 15)

The same two notions, that of causal power and that of logical incompatibility, are, it is clear, also involved in parallel fashion in the idea of *contingent existence*. It is thus misleading to say, as Cummins does, that "contingent connections are explicated in terms of separability, which amounts to nothing more than the possibility of existing apart" ("Idea of Existence," 72).

Hume deals with the Locke-Clarke argument in part 9 of the *Dialogues on Natural Religion*.<sup>24</sup> It is presented by Demea:

What was it ... which determined something to exist rather than nothing, and bestowed being on a particular possibility, exclusive of the rest? *External causes*, there are supposed to be none. *Chance* is a word without a meaning. Was it *Nothing*? But that can never produce any thing. We must, therefore, have recourse to a necessarily-existent Being, who carries the

REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction. (D 189)

Again, as in Clarke, the causal context of the discourse is clear. The necessity of a necessary existent consists in its containing within itself the reason for its being, that is, given the context, the cause for its being, and continuing to be; it is a matter of the causal relation between the thing and its being.

It is Cleanthes who replies to this argument.

Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction. Nothing, that is distinctly conceivable, implies a contradiction. Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent. There is no being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction. Consequently there is no being, whose existence is demonstrable. (D 189)

In this context, when Hume asserts that "whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent," it is clear that he is asserting that we can conceive no thing with causal powers that are such that they are logically incompatible with the non-existence of the thing. That this is Hume's point is clear from what he next goes on to suggest, namely, that there doesn't seem to be any reason why the material universe can't have the causal properties that logically exclude its non-existence: "We dare not affirm that we know all the qualities of matter; and for aught we can determine, it may contain some qualities, which, were they known, would make its non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five" (D 190). It is the *qualities* of things that make for their necessary existence, if there is such, that is, the *causal qualities*. But, of course, as Hume has just said, there is nothing in the concept of any thing, that is, no causal quality, such that having that quality logically excludes non-existence; the more general case against any necessary existence holds for a material necessary existent.

We would be able to demonstrate a priori the existence of a thing if we conceived its having a causal quality that logically excludes its non-existence. "But it is evident, that this can never happen, while our faculties remain the same as at present" (D 189). The ideas that we have are derived from our impressions, and, Hume is asserting, we have no impressions, nor, therefore, any ideas of things with causal qualities that logically exclude the non-existence of those things. In other words, Hume's argument here is of a piece with his general case concerning causal relations, that they never imply any necessity.

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Hume's point about causation, his notorious point perhaps, is that  
(@)

there is no cause for this thing,

is not self-contradictory but is in fact *quite conceivable*. Which is to say that he argues that the causal maxim, that whatever has a beginning must have a cause, is neither intuitive nor demonstratively certain. He reasons as follows:

[A]s all distinct ideas are separable from each other, and as the ideas of cause and effect are evidently distinct, 'twill be easy for us to conceive any object to be non-existent this moment and existent the next without conjoining to it the distinct idea of a cause or productive principle ... the actual separation of these objects is so far possible, that it implies no contradiction nor absurdity. (T 79-80)

In the perspicuous notation of the later logical atomists, Hume is claiming that

$(\exists y)[By \ \& \ \sim(\exists x)Cxy]$

is not a contradiction.<sup>25</sup> Here, 'By' means "y has a beginning" and 'Cxy' means "x causes y." At this point in his argument, Hume does not have to tell us more about what 'x causes y' means. (The passage quoted is from *Treatise*, 1.3.3, and he does not tell us what 'x causes y' means until *Treatise*, 1.3.14.) All that he needs to know about the meanings in order for the argument to go through is that the concept of *beginning* or *to be after not having been* does not imply the concept of *causing*—which, surely, it does not.<sup>26</sup> As Hume says, the concepts, or, in his terms, the ideas, are distinct, that is, logically distinct, and so separable.

### IV. Conceiving Things as Existent

"The idea of existence," Hume tells us, "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" (T 66-67). If the argument that we have given so far is correct, then what this means is that whenever we conceive a thing we also conceive that there is a quality which is present in it.

It is evident that Hume takes this to be a logical truth. But this should not surprise the reader of the *Treatise*: he has already told us as much. Thus, earlier in the *Treatise* Hume has mentioned the notion that we sometimes have impressions which *apparently* have no precise or exact degree of quality or shape. But this is due not to the intrinsic nature but from our incapacity to view them clearly; to suppose otherwise is to fall into a contradiction:

The confusion, in which impressions are sometimes involv'd, proceeds only from their faintness and unsteadiness, not from any capacity in the mind to receive any impression, which in its real existence has no particular degree nor proportion. That is a contradiction in terms; and even implies the flattest of all contradictions, *viz.* that 'tis possible for the same thing both to be and not to be. (T 19)

Hume's 'to be' here of course ties in with the notions of existence and predication in the way that we have suggested: to assert that there is such an impression is to assert at once that it exists, that is, that there is a determinate mode present in it, and also that there is no determinate mode present in it. Which is, as Hume says, a contradiction.

But if it is indeed a logically necessary truth that "[w]hatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent," then, does it not follow, as Cummins suggests ("Idea of Existence," 70), that existence is a necessary predicate of every thing? And how can that be reconciled with Hume's other claim that no matter of fact is necessary, that the existence of every thing is contingent?

The answers to these questions turn upon what one means by *existence* and by *necessity*. We have laid much of the groundwork; we can bring these points together by looking in a bit more detail at his argument concerning causation, quoted above. For these purposes it is not the argument itself that concerns us (though it *is* a sound enough argument), but rather the nature of the ideas that the argument asserts to be distinct and separable. These ideas have to be *abstract* ideas. Hume establishes the *logical possibility* of a thing that begins to exist but is not caused by *separating* the ideas of *beginning* and *caused*. These ideas are clearly abstract. Thus, to establish that a truth is not necessary it suffices to separate two abstract ideas. Conversely, to establish that a truth is necessary it suffices to show that two abstract ideas are inseparable.

Two abstract ideas will be separable just in case that the habit that associates particulars into the one idea is different from the habit that associates particulars into the other. Since these habits are based on

relations of resemblance, the two ideas will be separable just in case that the relations of resemblance on which they are based are different, that is, *just in case that the modes or qualities in things that ground these resemblance relations are distinct*. Thus, the abstract ideas of red and white are separable because red and white as modes of things are distinct.

Let me say right now that there are real problems with Hume's notion of resemblance. Exact resemblance may not create too many difficulties, but inexact resemblance certainly does. The former is a two-term relation but the latter is polyadic. Hume notes that "[*blue* and *green* are different simple ideas, but are more resembling than *blue* and *scarlet*" (T 637). This shows that the relation to which he is here appealing is four-termed—*x* resembles *y* more than *z* resembles *w*—and as Butchvarov has shown, such relations present insurmountable problems to the nominalist.<sup>27</sup>

Somewhat less problematic is the fact that resemblances themselves fall into classes. *Red* and *white* are both *colour-resemblances*, as opposed to *sound-resemblances* and *shape-resemblances*. The red and white resemblances resemble each other in being colour resemblances, and so on. Resemblances create abstract ideas; these ideas will be different, since the resemblances are distinct. But that distinctness among resemblances is compatible with those resemblances also resembling. These latter resemblances among resemblances will also be capable of generating abstract ideas. Specifically, the relation among resemblances of being colour-resemblances will generate the associational habit that constitutes the *generic* abstract idea of being coloured. This abstract idea will be different from both the abstract idea of red and the abstract idea of white, since it is based on a different resemblance relation. It is in fact based on the more general resemblance relation that consists in effect of the specific relations taken disjunctively:

*x* resembles *y* in being coloured =

*x* resembles *y* in being white or  
*x* resembles *y* in being red or ...

The generic mode of resemblance is thus not separable from specific modes of resembling, nor, therefore, in Hume's (traditional) terminology, is it distinct. Nonetheless, it is a more general relation of resemblance and, as a consequence, the individual ideas and impressions that are, via association, part of each of those specific abstract ideas will also be parts, via association, of the more generic abstract idea. The general term connected with the generic abstract

idea will apply to more individuals than does the term connected with the specific abstract idea. Nonetheless the generic idea will be inseparable from the specific ideas that fall under it, since, insofar as the generic mode of resemblance is not distinct from the specific modes, we will never be able to form the idea of an individual that falls under the generic idea but not under one of the specific ideas. Hence, the abstract idea of red is inseparable from the abstract idea of being coloured. But if the idea of F is inseparable from the idea of G, then F and G are necessarily connected: it is a necessary truth that all F are G. Hence it follows that, for example, the inference from being red to being coloured is necessary.

One can have other cases, of a more traditional sort. Thus, consider the abstract ideas of bachelor and male. The abstract idea of a bachelor is based on one resemblance relation, which itself is a simple conjunction of two resemblance relations, one of which is the relation that is the basis of the abstract idea of male. By virtue of the definition of the idea of bachelor, in other words, the relation that is the basis of the idea of bachelor is not distinct from the relation that is the basis of the idea of male. It follows that the abstract idea of bachelor is inseparable from the abstract idea of male, and therefore that the inference from being a bachelor to being a male is necessary.

This account of the necessity of the inference from being red to being coloured requires us to hold that we can have *abstract ideas* that are *different* but *inseparable*. Two abstract ideas will be *different* if the ways of resembling upon which they are based are different. The abstract ideas will be *separable* if the ways of resembling are distinct and therefore can form ideas = images of things that are the one but not the other. Two abstract ideas will be *inseparable* if the ways of resembling upon which they are based are inseparable, for example, by virtue of rules of definition or by one resemblance in question being a resemblance amongst resemblances. Inseparability is the criterion of *logical necessity*.

Here we are talking about ideas that are *different yet inseparable*. This would seem to conflict with the well-known Humean claim "*that all ideas, which are different, are separable*" (T 24). But this particular thesis applies to *things* and abstract ideas are not things. The dictum applies to impressions and ideas in the sense of images, that is, particular ideas. But an abstract idea is *not a thing*; it is, rather, a *habit* or *disposition*. It is thus compatible with Hume's dictum to hold that two abstract ideas can be different yet separable.

It is this sort of thing that is the basis for the Humean account of the distinction of reason. Briefly, where abstract ideas are different but inseparable, we have a distinction of reason. On this basis, Hume can hold that there is a distinction of reason between a thing and

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existence—these two ideas are different—while also holding that the idea of a thing and the idea of existence are inseparable.

Once again it is easy to fit this into the tradition in which Hume is situated. The distinction of reason (“*distinctio rationis ratiocinatae*”) is defined by Suarez as arising

from inadequate concepts of one and the same thing. Although the same object is apprehended in each concept, the whole reality contained in the object is not adequately represented, nor is its entire essence and objective notion exhausted, by either of them. This occurs frequently when we conceive an object in terms of its bearing on different things, or when we represent it in the way we conceive these different things. Hence such a distinction invariably has a foundation in fact, even though formally it will be said to spring from inadequate concepts of the same thing.<sup>28</sup>

Descartes describes the distinction of reason in much the same terms: the distinction of reason

is a distinction between a substance and some attribute of that substance without which the substance is unintelligible; alternatively, it is a distinction between two such attributes of a single substance. Such a distinction is recognized by our inability to form a clear and distinct idea of the substance if we exclude from it the attribute in question, or, alternatively, by our inability to perceive clearly the idea of one of the two attributes if we separate it from the other. (*Principles*, 1.62)

We have a distinction of reason with respect to a certain object when, on the one hand, the object is an inseparable unity of certain parts, and, on the other hand, we can form two different ideas of the object based on those parts. Each of those ideas will be inadequate to the object in that neither represents the object in its total complexity, though each will be true “as far as it goes.” The parts of the object are inseparable; they are therefore not real parts. Nonetheless, there is in reality a foundation for this distinction. As Suarez puts it,

things said to be thus distinct are real entities, or rather a single real entity conceived according to various aspects. The same is evident from the fact that reason does not produce the entities it thus distinguishes, but merely conceives things which are not distinct as though they were distinct. Hence it is not the objects distinguished but only the distinction itself

that results from the reasoning.

Nevertheless the mind does not err in thus distinguishing, because it does not assert that things conceived in this manner are distinct in fact, but simply and without composition—that is, without affirmation or denial—conceives them as distinct through precise abstraction whereby it effects, as it were, this type of distinction. If later it predicates such reflection or composition of objects so conceived, it does not affirm simply, but only in a qualified manner, that is, according to the viewpoint of the mind, that they are distinct. (*Disputation 7*, 19-20)

The examples that Descartes gave of entities distinguishable only by reason are those between a thing and its attributes and between two attributes of a thing. Suarez gives different examples:

Peter, man, animal, and other like predicates, as they really are in Peter, are not distinct in objective fact ... but only by the reasoned reason. (*Disputation 7*, 60)

It is this distinction of reason that Hume can make between the species and the genus. We have the idea of the genus applying to the species, but not wholly exhausting it. It is therefore an inadequate idea of the species. Nonetheless, there is a foundation in reality for distinguishing the species from the genus. This foundation consists in the different resemblance relations which are the basis for the two abstract ideas. Of course, where Hume has different but inseparable abstract ideas, Descartes and Suarez have different and separable abstract ideas; they describe the distinction of reason in terms of "separating attributes in thought." But Suarez also holds that

it is impossible for the same thing to be altogether disjoined and separated from itself in the real order; an open contradiction is involved, since no greater union can be thought of than total identity in nature. This is not merely union, but unity. As it is impossible for the indivisible to be divided, so it is impossible for what is wholly the same to be separated from itself. (*Disputation 7*, 41)

And this, as Hume and Berkeley argue, can't be held jointly with the two further theses that these philosophers held, that what is possible in thought is possible in reality and that the abstract concepts are separable in thought. The result is the Humean notion that one can have two abstract ideas that are at once different but inseparable.

A similar account can be given for other truths traditionally reckoned to be necessary. Thus, for example, consider the truth that whatever is extended is coloured, the synthetic a priori truth that Hume, like Berkeley, uses to attack the Cartesian notion that ordinary objects are in reality substances whose essence is extension and which are wholly uncoloured. Hume argues that extension is, in Locke's terms, a "modification of [a] simple idea." It is "made up only of that simple Idea of an Unite repeated"; "simple modes" are "Repetitions of this kind joined together" (*Essay*, 2.13.1). For Hume,

The table before me is alone sufficient by its view to give me the idea of extension. This idea, then, is borrow'd from, and represents some impression, which this moment appears to the senses. But my senses convey to me only the impression of colour'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner. (T 34)

Thus, for Hume, the extended is constituted by coloured points, and whatever resembles anything in being extended must also resemble it in being coloured. It follows that being extended is not distinct from being coloured. On the other hand, the abstract ideas of being extended and being coloured are different ideas, since any extended thing is a multiplicity of coloured things; the idea of extension contains the idea of multiplicity that is absent from the idea of colour. Still, though the abstract ideas are different, they are not separable. It follows that it is a necessary truth that whatever is extended is coloured.

In this way Hume is able, at least if we don't probe his nominalism too deeply, to account for the necessity of what later have come to be called "synthetic a priori" truths.

Among these truths is the proposition that whatever is a thing exists. The abstract idea of a thing is that of something qualified that is independent; the abstract idea of existence is that of something qualified. Clearly, the resemblances upon which the two abstract ideas are based are two. Yet, equally clearly, the two resemblances are inseparable. So the proposition that whatever is a thing exists is a necessary truth: "Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent."

But what about a particular thing, say Peter? Peter is a *whole*. This whole is a *unity*. Its parts are the various modifications that constitute it; Peter is the *individual that consists of the various qualities that modify him*. Suppose Peter is red and square. The abstract idea of red will apply to Peter, as will the abstract idea of square. Both these abstract ideas will contain the idea of Peter as parts; the associations based on the appropriate resemblance relations will ensure this. The abstract idea of red will thus be inseparable from the idea of Peter, though of course the two are different ideas. Similarly, the abstract idea

of square will be different from the idea of Peter but inseparable from the latter. Neither of these will give an adequate idea of Peter, who is not just red but also square. There is therefore a distinction of reason between Peter and red and Peter and square. More generally, there will also be a distinction of reason between a thing like Peter and its existence. Hume's position here follows that of Suarez, who holds that

existence and essence are not distinguished in the thing itself, even though the essence, conceived of abstractly and with precision, as it is in potency, be distinguished from actual existence.<sup>29</sup>

Hume thus far follows the tradition.

Cummins suggests ("Idea of Existence," 77) that for Hume there is no distinction of reason between a thing and its existence. He quotes Hume:

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)

Cummins understands this to imply that there is no distinction of reason between a thing and existence, from which he concludes that for Hume there is no (abstract) idea of existence, or at least no idea of existence different from the idea of a thing. But the text is hardly conclusive; in fact it should be read in quite a different way. The question to be asked as we attempt to understand its import is this: what is the "stead" that is supposed to be served by invoking the distinction of ideas (that is, reason)? The context makes clear: it will not serve in the "stead" of "opposing this," to wit, the thesis that "[w]hatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent." That is, it will not serve to establish that it is possible to conceive some thing that does not exist. What Hume is claiming is that we cannot appeal to the distinction of reason between a thing and existence to establish that we can form the idea of a thing that does not exist. That would require us to separate the idea of a thing from the idea of existence. But this we cannot do. Cummins suggests that this is because there is no distinction of reason between the idea of a thing and the idea of existence. But this is not what the passage says; it does not assert that

there is no difference between the idea of a thing and the idea of existence but only that these ideas are inseparable. Normally where we draw a distinction of reason between the inseparable parts of an impression or idea, for example, between its colour and its shape (T25), say the red colour and square shape present in the particular Peter, there we can form the idea of a thing which is red but not square, that is, falls under the one abstract idea and not the other. One can do this because the two abstract ideas are separable. One cannot do this in the case of a thing and its existence, to form the idea of a thing that does not exist, because the abstract ideas, while different, are not separable.

However, if there is a distinction of reason between a thing and its existence, or between a thing and its modes, then it follows directly that a thing, Peter, is logically inseparable from his modes, and his existence. Necessarily Peter is red, and necessarily Peter exists. This is the problem that concerns Cummins, for it does seem to conflict with Hume's other doctrine that all matters of fact are contingent.

But it is essential to note that in Hume, as in his predecessors, the discussion of necessary vs. contingent matters of fact takes place as we have seen in the context of *causal discourse*.<sup>30</sup> To say that a thing exists necessarily is to say that it has causal powers of a certain sort, while to say that it exists contingently is to say that it has causal powers of a different sort. Hume's argument is that no thing has causal powers of the former sort. *This argument stands*. Hence, the conclusion that Peter is necessarily red or necessarily exists is quite compatible with the claim that Hume wishes to defend against Descartes, Locke, and Clarke, that there are no necessary beings. One cannot appeal to Hume's claim that there are no necessary existents to argue that Hume cannot also say that a particular necessarily has the modes that it has, or necessarily exists.

Still, is there not something odd about asserting that Peter is necessarily red? Russell once argued that this was so, as part of a more lengthy argument against the idealists.<sup>31</sup> One can agree that his case against idealism is correct while not agreeing on this particular point. This argument concerned the claim of Bradley & Co. that a particular is a collection of qualities, that it is a whole of which its qualities are the parts. Thus, the particular Peter on this account is a whole consisting of the parts red and square. Various problems of individuation surround this account of particulars, and in part determine Russell's response. The main point, however, is that a particular is a whole of which its qualities are parts. But if

Peter = (red, square)

where

(a) { — , ... }

asserts that

(a') — is with ... ,

then

Peter is red

is the same as

red  $\in$  Peter

= red  $\in$  {red, square}

= red is in the thing that is ( = ) {red, square}

This is naturally taken to be an analytic or true by definition, and therefore necessary. But this is of little significance, about as significant ontologically as any proposition true by definition. What is important are the statements of the form (a) = (a'), the statements that represent the facts that certain qualities are together with each other, thereby forming the wholes that are the particulars. What is important is not that Peter is red but that red is with square to form Peter. If it is necessary that Peter is red, it is *not logically necessary* that red is with square. And of course, it is not logically necessary that red be with square since the abstract idea of red is separable from the abstract idea of blue.

If it is not logically necessary that

{red, square}

then in that sense if

Peter = {red, square}

then neither is it logically necessary that

Peter exist.

But have we not also said that a thing exists necessarily? Indeed we have, following Hume. However, in following Hume the sense of 'exist' we have used when we assert that any thing is necessarily an existent thing, is this: to say a thing exists is to say that there is quality present in it. Thus, what we are saying is that it is a necessary truth that

(E) For any thing, there is a quality present in it.

This principle (E) is what has been called the Principle of Exemplification,<sup>32</sup> that there is no particular that is not qualified in some way or other. This cuts pretty deep, as deep as the anti-platonistic principle that there are no (simple) qualities that are not exemplified in at least one particular. Deep ontological truths of this sort are reasonably characterized as necessary. Having done so, however, we have to specify the sense of 'necessary'. Hume's account of abstract ideas provides us with such an account, and upon it (E) is indeed necessary. At the same time, it also implies, as we have just seen, that no particular, considered as a whole with its qualities as parts, necessarily exists, in the sense that it is not logically necessary that the qualities which, qua together, constitute a particular should exist together.

In short, when we say that it is necessary that Peter exist we are asserting about Peter an implication of (E), the Principle of Exemplification. When we say that it is not necessary that Peter exist we are asserting about Peter that there is nothing about the qualities that, qua together, constitute him that makes it logically necessary that they exist together. We have after all not landed ourselves, or Hume, in a contradiction.<sup>33</sup>

### Conclusion

After making his illuminating remarks about Hume's argument concerning the inseparability of the idea of existence from the idea of a thing, Professor Cummins ends by finding the doctrine still mysterious. What I have been arguing is that if we locate Hume in the tradition of the substance philosophy then we will be able to find the doctrine less mysterious than Cummins supposes. To say that, however, does not imply that it is free of all difficulties. In particular, I think that Hume's nominalism raises tremendous problems. On this view, all qualities of things are as particular as the things of which they are qualities. Generality is to be accounted for in terms of resemblance among these qualities, perfect particulars as they have been called. As Russell has pointed out, this hardly solves the problem of universals, since resemblance itself must be taken to be a universal.<sup>34</sup> Moreover, there are real problems with respect to imperfect resemblance, as I have indicated.<sup>35</sup> There are also problems with respect to resemblances among resemblances. Finally, we should note that Hume accepts the traditional doctrine that all relational statements have to be understood as, objectively, about non-relational facts.<sup>36</sup> This applies in particular to resemblance: this relation too will have to be reduced to non-relational foundations. But as this relation is a universal, the

foundations into which it is analyzed must be universals—contrary to the nominalist supposition that all qualities of things are as particular as the things of which they are qualities. In other words, while there is more sense in Hume than Cummins perhaps allows, there are also many problems that may in the end lead us to reject some of his basic ontological claims. Fortunately, none of these difficulties affect Hume's analysis of causation; but that is another story.<sup>37</sup>

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1. P. Cummins, "Hume on the Idea of Existence," *Hume Studies* 17, no. 1 (April 1991): 61-82. Professor Cummins' paper was read at the meeting of the Hume Society in Chicago, April, 1991. A shorter version of this paper was presented as discussion.
2. John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), 2.12.1 (hereafter cited as *Essay*); references are to book, chapter, and paragraph.
3. A. Arnauld and P. Nicole, *La Logique de Port-Royal*, ed. Ch. Jourdain (Paris, 1854), 1.5 (hereafter cited as *Logique*); references are to part and chapter.
4. G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *The Works of George Berkeley, Bishop of Cloyne*, ed. A. Luce and T. Jessop, vol. 2 (London, 1948-57), sec. 5 (hereafter cited as *Human Knowledge*); references are to paragraph.
5. D. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 2-3 (hereafter cited as "T").
6. J. Weinberg has drawn our attention to this logical argument against abstraction; see his *Abstraction, Relation and Induction* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1965).
7. R. Descartes, *Objections and Replies to the Meditations*, in *Philosophical Writings*, trans. J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (Cambridge, 1985), 1:117 (hereafter cited as *Replies*).
8. On associationism in general, see F. Wilson, *Psychological Analysis and the Philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (Toronto, 1990).
9. Hume's associationist account of abstract ideas is discussed in detail in F. Wilson, "Abstract Ideas and Other Linguistic Rules in Hume," in a collection of essays on ideas in 17th and 18th century philosophy, ed. P. Cummins, North American Kant Society Studies in Philosophy Series, 2 vols. (forthcoming).
10. For a discussion of the Lockean critique, see F. Wilson, "The Lockean Revolution in the Theory of Science," in *Early Modern*

## HUME ON THE ABSTRACT IDEA OF EXISTENCE

*Philosophy: Epistemology, Metaphysics and Politics*, ed. S. Tweyman and G. Moyal (New York, 1986), 65-97.

11. Note, by the way, that in the passage we have just quoted Hume does *not* deny that we have an idea of *existence*, that is, an *abstract* idea of *existence*. All that he is saying is that in the judgement that *God is* this abstract idea is not represented in consciousness by a particular idea that is *distinct* from the idea of *God*. Pears simply misunderstands this passage; see D. Pears, *Hume's System* (Oxford, 1990), 34, 57.
12. A fuller account would have to refer to the role of language; see Wilson, "Abstract Ideas" (above, n. 9). For the radical nature of Hume's break with the tradition, see F. Wilson, critical review of *Hume's Sentiments*, by P. Jones, *Nous* 20 (1985), and "Hume and Derrida on Language and Meaning," *Hume Studies* 12, no. 2 (November 1986): 99-121.
13. As Cummins (above, n. 1), 75f. points out, the position of Dennis Bradford ("Hume on Existence," *International Studies in Philosophy* 15 [1983]: 1-12), that there are two sorts of entities, those that exist and those that don't, simply makes no sense in the Humean context.
14. Cummins (above, n. 1) perhaps does not see the force of this; see pp. 67f.
15. The reconstruction that culminates on Cummins, 71 I find entirely persuasive.
16. Translated in part in *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (above, n. 7), vol. 1 (hereafter cited as *Principles*); references are to part and paragraph.
17. Quotations are taken from *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. R. McKeon (New York, 1941).
18. S. Clarke, *A Discourse concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Natural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Christian Religion*, 6th ed. (London, 1725), 16 (hereafter cited as *Discourse*).
19. It is customary to make a sharp distinction for Aristotle between the 'is' of existence and the 'is' of predication. Clearly, I disagree: the 'is' of existence is to be understood in terms of the 'is' of predication. I see no good argument of a philosophical sort to back up the claim for two senses of 'is'. The justification is often made in terms of the "absolute" and "predicative" constructions in the philosopher's Greek. Kahn has pointed out the difficulty of making a firm syntactical distinction between the two constructions, and has argued further that the "absolute" construction ought not to be construed as making "existential" claims as opposed to "predicative." Kahn's case is convincing. See C. Kahn, "The Greek

- Verb 'To Be' and the Concept of Being," *Foundations of Language* 2 (1966): 245-65.
20. And also David Pears; see his *Hume's System* (above, n. 11), 34. For I. Kant, see his "The Impossibility of an Ontological Proof of the Existence of God," in *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. N. K. Smith (London, 1929), 500-507.
  21. And therefore, it *is* different from other predicates; nonetheless, it is still a predicate. Pears (above, n. 11), 56, misses this point.
  22. This necessary connection supports the subjunctive conditional to the effect that to conceive of something is to conceive of that thing as it would be if it were to exist. David Pears (above, n. 11) makes this conditional central to his account; he does not notice that the subjunctive conditional is parasitic upon the general truth or necessary connection. For a discussion of the way in which subjunctive conditionals receive support from laws, see F. Wilson, *Laws and Other Worlds* (Dordrecht, 1990). This discussion is explicitly Humean. One often has the impression, as one does in Pears, that reference to subjunctive conditionals is introduced without any serious attempt to make a connection with a Humean account of subjunctive conditionals. For a glance at the latter, see F. Wilson, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi, and W. L. Robison (San Diego, 1979), 101-20.
  23. I would argue that Descartes' account of the demonstration of a necessarily existent being is of a piece with that of Locke and Clarke. But that would add too much to an already overly long set of comments.
  24. D. Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. N. Kemp Smith (London, 1946) (hereafter cited as "D").
  25. Cf. J. Weinberg, *Ockham, Descartes, Hume* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1977), 143.
  26. As Weinberg, *ibid.*, chap. 10, has pointed out against the obscure criticisms of Miss Anscombe ("Hume Reconsidered," *Blackfriars* 43 [1962]: 188) and Anthony Kenny (*The Five Ways* [New York, 1969], 67).
  27. P. Butchvarov, *Resemblance and Identity* (Bloomington, Indiana, 1966), 115ff.
  28. F. Suarez, *On the Various Kinds of Distinctions*, from *Disputationes Metaphysicae, Disputatio 7*, trans. C. Vollert (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1947), 19 (hereafter cited as *Disputation 7*).
  29. F. Suarez, *On the Essence of Finite Being as Such, On the Existence of that Essence and their Distinction*, from *Disputationes*

- Metaphysicae, Disputatio* 31, trans. N. J. Wells (Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1983), 52 (hereafter cited as *Disputation* 31).
30. Cummins (above, n. 1) fails to note this; cf. his remarks in n. 27.
  31. Cf. B. Russell, "The Philosophy of Logical Atomism," in *Logic and Knowledge*, ed. R. C. Marsh (London, 1956), 204.
  32. Cf. G. Bergmann, "Stenius on the *Tractatus*," in *Logic and Reality* (Madison, Wisconsin, 1964).
  33. This blurring together of the necessity of the Principle of Exemplification with the necessity of other truths occurs elsewhere in the history of philosophy. See F. Wilson, "The World and Reality in the *Tractatus*," *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 5 (1967): 253-60.
  34. B. Russell, "On the Relations of Universals and Particulars," in *Logic and Knowledge* (above, n. 31), 111-12.
  35. See note 19, above.
  36. Cf. F. Wilson, "Weinberg's Refutation of Nominalism," *Dialogue* 8 (1969): 460-74.
  37. Causation is the one relation that *does* fit the Aristotelian account of relations that Hume adopts!