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Hume on Conceivability and Inconceivability

D. TYCERIUM LIGHTNER

What other simple *Ideas* 'tis possible the Creatures in other parts of the Universe may have, by the Assistance of Senses and Faculties more or perfecter, than we have, or different from ours, 'tis not for us to determine. But to say, or think there are no such, because we conceive nothing of them, is no better an argument, than if a blind Man should be positive in it, that there was no such thing as Sight and Colours, because he had no manner of *Idea*, of any such thing, nor could by any means frame to himself any Notions about Seeing.

John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, IV .iii 23¹

At several important places in the *Treatise*² and the first *Enquiry*,³ Hume speaks of some things as being conceivable, other things as being inconceivable, and relates these claims to a thing's being possible or impossible, respectively. These places include his discussion of abstract ideas, his argument against the necessity of the principle of induction, his argument against the claim that everything must have a cause, and his argument that space and time are not infinitely divisible. Several times, Hume clearly infers the possibility of something from its conceivability. What is not so clear, however, is whether he ever infers the impossibility of something from its inconceivability. John P. Wright, in his rich work *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume*, argues that Hume ultimately rejects the universal principle that whatever is inconceivable is impossible, even though, Wright states, Hume

employs the principle early in the *Treatise*.⁴ Thus Wright's interpretation seems to render Hume's position inconsistent, or at least has Hume reversing himself in the course of the *Treatise*. It would be desirable to find an interpretation of Hume's texts that avoids this.

It is also unclear exactly what Hume means by "can" when he states that something "can be conceiv'd." It might mean that something can be conceived given our actual mental abilities and our actual pool of simple ideas with which we construct complex ideas. Or, it might mean that it can be conceived in some more idealized situation, such as one where we have a complete pool of simple ideas to draw upon, perfect memory, and a perfect ability to separate and combine ideas.

In order to have a clear understanding of Hume's notion of conceivability, and the arguments that involve this notion, we must determine both the force of the modality in this notion and whether Hume thought that inconceivability implies impossibility. We shall find that when Hume speaks of conceivability he means what can be conceived given our actual abilities and actual pool of simple ideas. Also, we shall find that Hume rejects the claim that whatever is inconceivable is impossible. This rejected generalization, however, must be distinguished from the narrower principle that if forming an idea of something would involve forming a contradictory idea, then that thing is impossible. Hume accepts this latter principle.⁵

1. Conceivable and Possible, Inconceivable and Impossible

Hume held that the ability to conceive something clearly and distinctly implies its possibility. This principle, which we shall call the Conceivability Principle, is stated by Hume in many passages and in many different forms. Here are some of them:

nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. (T 19-20)

'Tis an establish'd maxim in metaphysics, *That whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence, or in other words, that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible.* (T 32)

Whatever can be conceiv'd by a clear and distinct idea necessarily implies the possibility of existence... (T 43)

...whatever we *conceive* is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense... (A 650)⁶

The contrary of every matter of fact is still possible; because it can never imply a contradiction, and is conceived by the mind with the

same facility and distinctness, as if ever so conformable to reality.
(EHU 25)

I call the sort of possibility used in this principle "absolute" possibility because Hume uses this term as well (for example, at T 32). For Hume, something is absolutely possible if and only if it does not imply a contradiction.⁷ In the *Treatise* Hume uses the Conceivability Principle in cases of conceiving objects (e.g., T 32), conceiving events (e.g., T 89), and conceiving propositions (e.g., T 79-80).⁸

Several authors, such as Arthur Pap, have argued that Hume also held that inconceivability implies impossibility.⁹ This principle, which we shall call the Inconceivability Principle, is logically distinct from the Conceivability Principle, such that one could consistently accept one while rejecting the other. There are a number of reasons why one might think that Hume held this principle. We shall examine these one at a time, and then consider some reasons to think that Hume did not hold it. In the end, it should become clear that Hume did not accept this principle.

One argument for Hume's acceptance of the Inconceivability Principle rests on the passage at T 32 where Hume gives one of his formulations of the Conceivability Principle. Hume states that "We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible." Here Hume does appear to make the inference from an inability to form an idea of something to that thing's impossibility. Furthermore, Hume uses the phrases "form an idea of," "imagine," and "conceive" interchangeably.¹⁰ So in this instance Hume seems to endorse the inference from inconceivability to impossibility. Since a mountain without a valley appears to have been used as an example of a contradictory object by early modern philosophers,¹¹ this passage suggests that Hume used 'inconceivable' as meaning contradictory.

This passage, however, stands alone in Hume's metaphysical writings, or so I shall argue. Nowhere else does Hume state or make such an inference. As we shall see, there are a number of instances where Hume declares something to be inconceivable (such as a vacuum, or external objects that are specifically different from perceptions) but then does not infer it to be impossible. Furthermore, whenever Hume states or employs the Conceivability Principle in his metaphysical writings, he always does so in terms of conceivability implying possibility, or impossibility implying inconceivability (which is equivalent). In Book I of the *Treatise*, Hume states or uses the Conceivability Principle no less than seventeen times.¹² In the *Abstract*, he does so at least three times, and in the first *Enquiry*, at least four.¹³ If Hume did accept the Inconceivability Principle, one would think that in the twenty-four or more instances of his stating or using the Conceivability Principle, he would have made it clear that the inference goes both ways. As it stands, we have so far found only the single case of the mountain without a valley example at T 32.

Concerning the mountain without a valley example, since it appears to be a case where one tries to conceive a contradictory state of affairs (rather than one that is merely contingently beyond our ability to form ideas) the minimum that Hume here commits himself to is the principle that if an idea of a thing would be contradictory, then that thing is absolutely impossible. Let us call this the Contradiction Principle.

2. Infinitely Divisible Space

Next, one might think that Hume argues for the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of space from its inconceivability. This would be an instance of the Inconceivability Principle. This argument, if Hume makes it, occurs across T I ii 1 and T I ii 2. The general idea is that in T I ii 1, Hume argues for the claim that we cannot form ideas that are infinitely divisible. Then in T I ii 2, he infers from this that objects cannot be infinitely divisible. I think this sort of interpretation is mistaken. Unfortunately these two sections of the *Treatise* are very difficult to follow. Thus, in order to give a convincing interpretation of them, I shall have to discuss them in some detail.

T I ii 1 is entitled "Of the infinite divisibility of our ideas of space and time." Hume is arguing against infinite divisibility. Let us look at the second, and part of the third, paragraphs of this section:

'Tis universally allow'd, that the capacity of the mind is limited, and can never attain a full and adequate conception of infinity: And tho' it were not allow'd, 'twou'd be sufficiently evident from the plainest observation and experience. 'Tis also obvious, that whatever is capable of being divided *in infinitum*, must consist of an infinite number of parts, and that 'tis impossible to set any bounds to the number of parts, without setting bounds at the same time to the division. It requires scarce any induction to conclude from hence, that the *idea*, which we form of any finite quality, is not infinitely divisible, but that by proper distinctions and separations we may run up this idea to inferior ones, which will be perfectly simple and indivisible. In rejecting the infinite capacity of the mind, we suppose it may arrive at an end in the division of its ideas; nor are there any possible means of evading the evidence of this conclusion.

'Tis therefore certain, that the imagination reaches a *minimum*, and may raise up to itself an idea, of which it cannot conceive any sub-division, and which cannot be diminished without a total annihilation. (T 26-27)

The conclusion of the second paragraph of T I ii 1 is that the mind can divide an idea only a finite number of times. The argument seems to contain as a premise the claim that if something is infinitely divisible, it consists of an

infinite number of parts. Hume seems to regard this premise as a necessary truth. It is unclear, however, when Hume says that the mind is limited, whether he regards this as a contingent psychological fact or as a necessary truth. Thus, it is unclear whether the conclusion is a psychological or necessary truth by Hume's lights. In the third paragraph, Hume infers that ideas consist of minimal ideas, given that the mind can only divide them a finite number of times.

This is the only portion of T I ii 1 that we need examine. I have skipped over some very difficult passages concerning the existence of ordinary objects smaller than minimal impressions and ideas. Fortunately, they are not relevant for our current purposes. We are investigating whether Hume argues from the inconceivability of something to its impossibility in T I ii 1 and T I ii 2. In T I ii 2, Hume concludes that the infinite divisibility of space is impossible. But does he claim that such a thing is inconceivable, and does he infer the former from the latter? In T I ii 1, Hume does claim that we cannot form ideas that are infinitely divisible, though it is not clear whether this is a psychological limitation or a necessary limitation. Either claim could plausibly be taken as asserting the inconceivability of infinitely divisible objects (if we take an inability to form infinitely divisible ideas to be the same as an inability to conceive an object that is infinitely divisible), and so either reading of the passage is consistent with interpreting Hume as making the inference from inconceivability to impossibility. The next thing to do, then, is to look at T I ii 2, and see how Hume does in fact infer the claim that space and time are indivisible.

T I ii 2 begins with a curious discussion of "adequate" ideas:

Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects; and this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge. But our ideas are adequate representations of the most minute parts of extension; and thro' whatever divisions and subdivisions we may suppose these parts to be arriv'd at, they can never become inferior to some ideas, which we form. The plain consequence is, that whatever *appears* impossible and contradictory upon the comparison of these ideas, must be *really* impossible and contradictory, without any farther excuse or evasion. (T 29)

This passage is very strange on the surface of it. Hume seems to be making very strong claims about what we can infer about any object of which we have an adequate idea. A similar remark is made in the next paragraph of this section. There he states that

I first take the least idea I can form of a part of extension, and being certain that there is nothing more minute than this idea, I conclude,

that whatever I discover by its means must be a real quality of extension. (T 29)

Again Hume seems to be endorsing a very strong inference. One might expect such claims from a rationalist, but not from Hume. Let us try to determine how we should interpret these remarks.

First, let us see how one might interpret these passages so as to have it that Hume is using the Inconceivability Principle (that inconceivability implies impossibility). In the first paragraph of T I ii 2, one might take Hume to be arguing in the following manner, as do Robert J. Fogelin and George S. Pappas.¹⁴ Hume is declaring our ideas of the most minute parts of extension to be adequate ideas. He is also asserting that whatever is true of an adequate idea is true of its object. This principle is defensible since an "adequate" idea, among early modern philosophers, seems to have meant an idea that is a perfectly accurate and detailed representation of its object.¹⁵ Now, Hume holds that our ideas of the most minute parts of extension are indivisible (that is, it is impossible to conceive something smaller than the most minute parts of extension). Hence, the most minute parts of extension are indivisible (that is, it is impossible for there to be something smaller than the most minute parts of extension).¹⁶ As Pappas writes, "From the claim that there is no idea smaller than a given one, presently attended to, Hume infers that there is no bit of extension smaller than that idea."¹⁷

This sort of interpretation faces a number of problems. First, it commits Hume to the principle that whatever properties an adequate idea has are also had by its object. But Hume never states such a principle. Rather, in the first paragraph of T I ii 2, he states the principle that whatever *relations* hold between adequate ideas also hold between their objects. It seems clear that agreement is a relation, and, by his examples, for Hume a contradiction is usually (if not always) a proposition which relates different objects. Also, in the last sentence of this paragraph, Hume speaks of making an inference "upon the comparison of these ideas," rather than upon the examination of one idea and its properties. In the case of the above-quoted passage from the second paragraph of T I ii 2, Hume states of "the least idea I can form of a part of extension" that "by its means" he can discover qualities of extension; so he only says that *using* the idea will somehow allow us to make inferences about the qualities of extension. He does not state that the inference will proceed from properties of the idea to properties of its object.

Next, this interpretation runs into conflict with Hume's theory of knowledge. In the first paragraph of T I ii 2, when Hume is making claims about what can be inferred from adequate ideas, he declares that "this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge." In the *Treatise*, Hume takes knowledge to be of relations between objects (T I iii 1). Knowledge involves certainty, and is not possible where the objects are related

by time or place, identity, or causation.¹⁸ Knowledge is only possible in cases where objects are related by resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, or proportions in quantity or number. The notion of adequacy is not mentioned when Hume presents his theory of knowledge, and so the theory does not appear to require related objects to be adequate for knowledge to be achieved. The foundation of human knowledge, according to Hume's theory, appears to be the immutability and necessity of particular kinds of relations, rather than the adequacy of the ideas related.

Furthermore, even if this interpretation is correct about how Hume is arguing, it does not have him using the Inconceivability Principle (that is, reasoning from inconceivability to impossibility). On this interpretation, the inference is driven by a principle concerning adequate ideas, and not by the Inconceivability Principle. If anything, Hume's making use of the fact that the ideas in question are adequate seems to indicate that mere inconceivability is not enough to make the inference to the impossibility of infinite divisibility. So this interpretation actually seems to support the claim that Hume does not accept the Inconceivability Principle.

Since this interpretation is problematic, let us try to develop a different one. First, notice that the first paragraph of T I ii 2 seems too condensed to be in itself an argument against the infinite divisibility of space. All the other paragraphs in this section have arguments that are spelled out in some detail, and with relative clarity. Perhaps, then, we can view this first paragraph as an introduction to the section, giving some indication of what is to come. To evaluate this proposal, we need to first look at what is contained in the section, and then see whether the first paragraph is providing a glimpse of what follows.

Disregarding for now, then, its first paragraph, section T I ii 2 contains first, two arguments for the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of space (which Hume claims can also be applied to time). This is followed by an argument for the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of time (which Hume claims implies the impossibility of the infinite division of space). Next, Hume argues that it is possible for space and time to be only finitely divisible. Let us examine these arguments.

Hume's first argument for the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of space, which is contained in the second paragraph of T I ii 2, has the following structure: it is determined that the idea of an infinitely divisible extension is the same as the idea of an infinite extension, and thus the ideas of a finite extension and infinite divisibility are shown to contradict one another, therefore an infinitely divisible finite extension is impossible. This argument is constructed by examining our "clear ideas." Thus we can read this argument as being a case of discovering a relationship of contradiction between clear ideas, and concluding that it is impossible for their objects to be united. That is, Hume uses the Contradiction Principle. Such reasoning is perfectly in

keeping with Hume's theory of knowledge, which has contrariety as one of the relations that invariably holds between objects when their ideas are so related (T 70). As was already noted, in his theory of knowledge Hume does not require ideas to be adequate in order for us to gain knowledge about their objects. Rather, the inference from ideas to objects depends upon the kind of relation that holds between the ideas, and not upon the adequacy of the ideas (e.g., for Hume, even if I had adequate ideas of my desk and my paperweight, this would not give me knowledge of how they are spatially related). Thus in this case, Hume does not require that these ideas of extension be adequate in order to make an inference about extension; the fact that the ideas are contrary to each other is enough to make the inference go through.

The main passage in this paragraph that has caused confusion is where Hume states that "I first take the least idea I can form of a part of extension, and being certain that there is nothing more minute than this idea, I conclude, that whatever I discover by its means must be a real quality of extension." It looks as though Hume is making a very strong inference from the existence of minimal ideas to the existence of minimal objects, but he actually is not. What he does with his least idea of extension is say that if he were to repeat it an infinite number of times, and put them all together, this would lead to an idea of an infinitely divisible extension that is infinite in length, and so is contrary to the idea of a finite extension. And it is from these contradictory ideas that Hume concludes that space cannot be infinitely divisible. When Hume says of his least idea of extension "whatever I discover by its means must be a real quality of extension," he means that minimal ideas *play a role* in discovering that certain ideas are contradictory, since putting an infinite number of these minimal ideas together in order leads Hume to discover that the ideas of infinite divisibility and of finite extension are contradictory. So "by its means," the desired conclusion about extension is reached. Hume's argument may not be a good one in the final analysis, but it does not proceed via the adequacy of our ideas, nor via the Inconceivability Principle. It proceeds by the much more strict Contradiction Principle.

The next two arguments for the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of space and time are *reductios*. That is, the negation of the conclusion is assumed, and a contradiction is derived from it.

At the end of the section, Hume states the Conceivability Principle (conceivability implies possibility) and uses it to argue for the possibility that space and time are only finitely divisible. Since we can conceive space and time as being only finitely divisible, it is possible. This is also where Hume gives the examples of conceiving a golden mountain and of being unable to conceive a mountain without a valley. As has been already discussed, the mountain without a valley example seems best read as illustrating the Contradiction Principle.

So in this section, Hume uses the Contradiction Principle and the Conceivability Principle. Perhaps we can read the first paragraph of the section as briefly introducing these principles. Suppose that in the first paragraph of the section we read “adequate” idea as clear and distinct idea. We can then say that in this paragraph Hume is asserting *inter alia* that if two clear and distinct ideas can be united¹⁹ (that is, if they are “agreeable”), then the objects they represent can be united as well. This is a special case of the Conceivability Principle. In the last sentence of this passage, he asserts *inter alia* a version of the Contradiction Principle: if two ideas are contradictory, then it is impossible for the objects that they represent to be united. When Hume states “Wherever ideas are adequate representations of objects, the relations, contradictions and agreements of the ideas are all applicable to the objects,” he is trying to say that whenever ideas are clear and distinct representations of objects, the relations of resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, proportions in quantity or number, and agreement (which is the opposite of contrariety) between these ideas are all applicable to the objects. In support of this, notice that Hume next states that “this we may in general observe to be the foundation of all human knowledge.” In T I iii 1, Hume asserts that it is only the relations of resemblance, contrariety, degrees in quality, and proportions in quantity or number that can be the objects of knowledge. He does not mention agreement, but this is covered under the Conceivability Principle, which he treats separately. The fact that it is contrariety that Hume is going to use in this section is foreshadowed by his singling it out for mention in the last sentence of this paragraph.

The idea behind reading “adequate” at the beginning of T I ii 2 as clear and distinct is that the Conceivability Principle applies to clear and distinct ideas, and when Hume argues in the second paragraph of the section via the Contradiction Principle, he states that he is using “clear” ideas.²⁰ Also, Hume uses the Conceivability Principle to argue for the absolute possibility of the finite divisibility of space and time, and this principle applies to clear and distinct ideas. Now, in order to integrate the first paragraph of T I ii 2 into the rest of the section, and the rest of the *Treatise*, we have to interpret it as an introduction and summary of the section. As such, the talk of “adequacy,” here at least, must be read as “clear and distinct.” Admittedly, such an interpretation strains against what at that time was the common philosophical meaning of “adequate,” but making this move allows us to integrate the first paragraph of T I ii 2 into the rest of the section, and the rest of the *Treatise*. The most important thing we have discovered about Hume’s use of “adequate” in T I ii 2 is that Hume does not use uncharacteristically strong principles concerning adequate ideas.

So, summing up, on my reading of the first paragraph of T I ii 2, the discussion of adequate ideas briefly introduces two principles that Hume then goes on to use in that section: the Contradiction Principle and the

Conceivability Principle. When he states that the contradictions and agreements of adequate ideas of objects are applicable to the objects themselves, he means that if clear and distinct ideas of objects are contrary to each other then the objects cannot be united, and if clear and distinct ideas of objects are agreeable, then the objects can be united. This is exactly how Hume argues for the impossibility of the infinite divisibility of space in the second paragraph of this section, and for the possibility of the only finite divisibility of space and time at the end of this section. The other arguments in this section are straightforward reductios. Thus in T I ii 1 and T I ii 2 Hume does not argue from the inconceivability of infinite divisibility to its impossibility.

Even if the reader does not find my interpretation of these sections convincing, it should at least be clear that they are very difficult to interpret, and for this reason alone, they cannot provide good support for the claim that Hume endorses the Inconceivability Principle. Being so opaque, these sections do not provide a clear case of inferring impossibility from inconceivability.

3. Inconceivable but not Impossible

So, with the possible exception of the mountain without a valley example, we have not yet found a case of Hume using the Inconceivability Principle. Let us now see if we can find cases of Hume accepting the inconceivability of something, and yet not concluding that it is impossible.

In a passage from the first *Enquiry*, Hume acknowledges the possibility of alien senses that to us are inconceivable. He states that

other beings may possess many senses of which we can have no conception; because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit, by the actual feeling and sensation. (EHU 20)

Here Hume clearly states that it is possible for other beings to possess sensory impressions that we cannot conceive. Thus it seems that such impressions are possible yet inconceivable. Perhaps we can regard the impressions produced by the sonar of a bat as just such an inconceivable sense.

There also seem to be several instances in Hume's writings where he asserts that something is inconceivable but then does not infer from this that it is impossible. Hume states that "'tis impossible to conceive either a vacuum and extension without matter, or a time, when there was no succession or change in any real existence" (T 40).²¹ So both a vacuum and time without change are inconceivable, according to Hume. Hume does not, however, go on to infer their impossibility. If he did accept the Inconceivability Principle, one would think that he would not neglect to make the strong and at the time controversial thesis that a vacuum is absolutely impossible. In fact, in the

Appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume does something quite different:

If we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the senses, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty. Thus if it be ask'd, whether or not the invisible and intangible distance be always full of *body*, or of something that by an improvement of our organs might become visible or tangible, I must acknowledge, that I find no very decisive arguments on either side; tho' I am inclin'd to the contrary opinion.... (T 639)

Here we see Hume both declaring that he knows of no decisive arguments for or against the existence of a vacuum, and that he is inclined to think that there actually is a vacuum. Such an attitude is quite contrary to anyone who believes both that a vacuum is inconceivable and that whatever is inconceivable is impossible.

Similarly, Hume states in the *Treatise* that "'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions" (T 67). This is echoed later in the *Treatise*, when Hume states that "we never can conceive any thing but perceptions" (T 216), and "'tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature anything but exactly the same with perceptions" (T 218). This means that we cannot conceive of an external object that is different in nature from perceptions. Whether or not any such objects exist, however, is a question Hume does not answer. If he were going to answer it, we would expect to see it in T I iv 2, "Of scepticism with regard to the senses." Even though scholars disagree as to how this section ought to be interpreted, it is clear that Hume does not declare out of hand that external objects that are different in nature from perceptions are impossible merely because we cannot conceive them.

Let us think more about Hume's claim that "we never can conceive any thing but perceptions" (T 216). If Hume regards inconceivability as implying impossibility, then it would follow that Hume is committed to the view that perceptions are the only possible objects. Not only external objects, but God and the self are impossible beings if they be anything other than collections of perceptions. If Hume did accept this form of reasoning, then we would expect him to employ it in his discussion of the self and personal identity. He does argue that the self is a collection of perceptions, but he does not argue that this is so because it is absolutely impossible for the self, or anything else for that matter, to be anything but perceptions.

Another case is more controversial, and will be persuasive to only some scholars. In the *Enquiry*, Hume can be read as asserting that there are secret powers that make things happen as they do. Of these powers, Hume states they are inconceivable:

...but as to that wonderful force or power, which would carry on a moving body for ever in a continued change of place, and which bodies never lose but by communicating it to others; of this we cannot form the most distant conception. (EHU 33)

...our idea of power is not copied from any sentiment or consciousness of power within ourselves, when we give rise to animal motion, or apply our limbs to their proper use and office. That their motion follows the command of the will is a matter of common experience, like other natural events: But the power or energy by which this is effected, like that in other natural events, is unknown and inconceivable. (EHU 67)

But do we pretend to be acquainted with the nature of the human soul and the nature of an idea, or the aptitude of the one to produce the other? This is a real creation; a production of something out of nothing: Which implies a power so great, that it may seem, at first sight, beyond the reach of any being, less than infinite. At least it must be owned, that such a power is not felt, nor known, nor even conceivable by the mind. We only feel the event, namely, the existence of an idea, consequent to a command of the will: But the manner, in which this operation is performed, the power by which it is produced, is entirely beyond our comprehension. (EHU 68)

Several scholars, such as Galen Strawson, Donald W. Livingston, and John P. Wright, have argued that Hume accepts the existence of hidden powers and forces that are responsible for what happens in the world and in the mind, and are real properties of objects.²² In the above quotes, Hume clearly states that these forces are inconceivable. So here is an example of something that is not only possible but actual, and yet it is inconceivable. This interpretation of Hume, however, is controversial, and so I offer this example as one that only some may accept.²³ Even without this example, however, there is still ample support for my claims.

Hume does make one statement about the epistemic status of inconceivable objects. He states "we can never have reason to believe that any object exists, of which we cannot form an idea" (T 172). This is significantly weaker than saying that inconceivable objects are impossible. If Hume did think that inconceivable objects were impossible, then it is odd that he would bother making this weaker statement about them.

Given these examples, it seems that Hume rejects the Inconceivability Principle.²⁴ The only possible counterexample is the "mountain without a valley" passage. There is an interpretation, though, to explain it, along with the other passages we examined. I shall argue that for Hume 'conceivability'

means that something can be conceived given our actual abilities and our limited stock of simple ideas, and so the inference from inconceivability to impossibility is not generally allowed. A mountain without a valley, however, is for Hume a contradictory object, and so by the Contradiction Principle one can infer its impossibility.

4. Types of Conceivability

The next question to consider is what the force of the “can” is when Hume states that whatever “can be conceiv’d” is absolutely possible. Is he talking about what can be conceived given our actual mental abilities and our actual pool of simple ideas, or is he speaking of what can be conceived in some more idealized situation?

First, is there any point, philosophically speaking, to using an idealized notion of conceivability in the Conceivability Principle—for example, one in which we have all possible simple ideas to draw upon,²⁵ perfect memory, and a perfect ability to separate and combine ideas? Using this idealized notion in the Conceivability Principle, rather than a psychological notion, would not add to our ability to determine what is absolutely possible. It seems very tenuous to argue for the absolute possibility of a thing based merely on the claim that if we were only better able to form complex ideas, or had more simple ideas with which to work, we would be able to form a clear and distinct idea of it. Such a claim would be very difficult if not impossible to establish.

There would be one advantage, however, to having ‘conceivability’ mean a completely idealized ability to form concepts. With an ideal ability to conceive, the only perceptions that would be inconceivable would be contradictory objects (such as round squares). With all possible simple ideas at one’s disposal, and an ideal ability to combine them, one would be able to form all possible ideas of all possible objects. The only constraint on conception would be the Conceivability Principle, which rules out conceiving absolutely impossible objects, and for Hume an object is absolutely impossible just in case it is contradictory.²⁶ If we were to read ‘conceivability’ in this way, then the inconceivability of a thing would imply its absolute impossibility, and the Conceivability Principle would be made into a biconditional, asserting both that conceivability implies possibility, and that possibility implies conceivability.

So if conceivability is an *ideal* ability, then Hume is committed to accepting the Inconceivability Principle. But we have already seen that Hume does not hold that inconceivability implies impossibility. Thus it is unnatural and uncharitable to interpret conceivability as an ideal ability.

Perhaps, then, by ‘conceivable’ Hume meant what can be conceived given our actual abilities to separate and combine ideas, and our actual stock of simple ideas.²⁷ Is there a rationale for Hume to use this psychological notion

of conceivability in the Conceivability Principle? In fact, if the modal 'can' in Hume's "can be conceiv'd" is this weak, why have a modal at all? Why not just use the principle that if we do conceive something, then it is possible?

Here is a possible answer. Suppose we do hold that actually having a conception of a thing in mind guarantees that the thing conceived is possible, and that on some occasion we form a conception of a thing in order to know the thing's possibility. But we do not continue to have the conception present to the mind all the time. Rather, we come to form the conception in the course of our investigations, and then later let it pass as we move on to other concerns. Now, one might wonder, is the thing that was conceived still possible, even after it is no longer being conceived? Well, we could form the conception again, and once it is formed we then know that the thing is possible. Thus it seems that merely knowing that one could form the conception is enough to know that the thing is possible, and the way we know that it can be done is by actually having done it in the past.

Furthermore, there are cases where we have not conceived particular objects but we know we can conceive them because we have the necessary agreeable ideas. I have a simple idea of purple obtained from the cover of my copy of Hume's *Treatise*, and an idea of the Eiffel Tower. I know that I can use these ideas to conceive a purple Eiffel Tower, even if I have never done so. Thus when Hume asserts that whatever is conceivable is possible, by 'conceivable' he might mean that we could form the conception given our actual mental abilities and resources. We have found a rationale for Hume to use this psychological notion of conceivability in the Conceivability Principle.

Let us now turn to Hume's texts to see how we should interpret 'conceivability'. First, it is clear that Hume took it to be the case that our actual ability to separate and combine ideas in the imagination is a perfect ability. That is, given a complex idea, we can decompose it into all of the distinct simple ideas that make it up and consider each one separately, and we can also take any consistent ideas and unite them into a complex idea. We are limited, however, in terms of the raw materials the imagination has with which to work. We have only a certain amount of simple ideas, and we cannot form any idea that is not composed from this pool. In the first *Enquiry* we find:

Nothing, at first view, may seem more unbounded than the thought of man, which not only escapes all human power and authority, but is not even restrained within the limits of nature and reality. To form monsters, and join incongruous shapes and appearances, costs the imagination no more trouble than to conceive the most natural and familiar objects.... What never was seen, or heard of, may yet be conceived; nor is any thing beyond the power of thought, except what implies an absolute contradiction.

But though our thought seems to possess this unbounded liberty, we shall find, upon a nearer examination, that it is really confined within very narrow limits, and that all this creative power of the mind amounts to no more than the faculty of compounding, transposing, augmenting, or diminishing the materials afforded us by the senses and experience.... In short, all the materials of thinking are derived either from our outward or inward sentiment: the mixture and composition of these belongs alone to the mind and will. Or, to express myself in philosophical language, all our ideas or more feeble perceptions are copies of our impressions or more lively ones. (EHU 18-19)

Nothing is more free than the imagination of man; and though it cannot exceed that original stock of ideas furnished by the internal and external senses, it has unlimited power of mixing, compounding, separating, and dividing these ideas, in all the varieties of fiction and vision. (EHU 47)

So we have it that the imagination has a limited amount of simple ideas with which to work, but it has an unlimited power to separate and combine the ideas that it does have. Thus Hume held that our actual ability to separate and combine our ideas is an ideal power.²⁸

We are limited, however, by the number of ideas we have with which to work. A blind person, for example, has no ideas of color, and so he cannot use any such ideas in forming complex ideas. Again in the first *Enquiry* we find:

If it happen, from a defect of the organ, that a man is not susceptible of any species of sensation, we always find that he is as little susceptible of the correspondent ideas. A blind man can form no notion of colours; a deaf man of sounds. Restore either of them that sense in which he is deficient; by opening this new inlet for his sensations, you also open an inlet for the ideas; and he finds no difficulty in conceiving these objects.... It is readily allowed, that other beings may possess many senses of which we can have no conception; because the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit, by the actual feeling and sensation. (EHU 20)

Here Hume clearly states that the imagination is limited by the pool or stock of ideas with which it has to work.

Now, if we read "conceivable" as what can be conceived given our actual stock of simple ideas to draw upon and our unlimited ability to separate and combine our ideas, then it is no surprise that Hume would deny that inconceivability implies impossibility. Furthermore, looking back at some of

the examples we examined earlier where Hume declares something to be inconceivable, it seems quite natural to think that he was working with this psychological notion of conceivability. As we just saw for a second time, Hume states that there may be alien senses we cannot conceive because “the ideas of them have never been introduced to us in the only manner by which an idea can have access to the mind, to wit, by the actual feeling and sensation.” That is, we cannot conceive them because they are not in our stock of ideas. In another example, Hume claims that we cannot conceive anything other than perceptions. Hume states that:

Let us chase our imagination to the heavens, or to the utmost limits of the universe; we never really advance a step beyond ourselves, nor can conceive any kind of existence, but those perceptions, which have appear'd in that narrow compass. (T 67-68)

Here Hume seems to be saying that what we can conceive is restricted by our limited experience. In the vacuum example, Hume thinks that it is unknown whether a vacuum exists because it is a subject that “exceeds all human capacity,” and it exceeds all human capacity because “we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the senses” (T 639). Thus a vacuum’s inconceivability seems to be due to a psychological limitation on our part.

Given these examples, the psychological reading of conceivability seems to be very natural. When Hume states that something “can be conceiv’d,” he means it can be conceived given our unlimited power to separate and combine our ideas and our limited number of simple ideas.

5. Conclusion

Summing up, we have learned that Hume accepts the Conceivability Principle and the Contradiction Principle, but he rejects the Inconceivability Principle. By ‘conceivable’, Hume means what can be conceived given our unlimited ability to separate and combine our ideas and our limited number of simple ideas. In T I ii 2, he asserts and utilizes the Conceivability and Contradiction Principles, but nothing stronger. In particular, he does not assert uncharacteristically strong principles concerning adequate ideas.

The importance of determining just what Hume’s notion of conceivability is, and what principles he accepts regarding it, lies in the fact that he makes essential use of this notion and the principles that govern it in some of his most famous arguments. If we are going to understand these arguments correctly, we must understand the elements that make them up. There is still much to clarify about Humean conception, such as determining just what sorts of things Hume took to be conceivable. Hopefully, though, we have made some progress in clarifying just what Hume meant by conceivability and how he used it.

NOTES

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1 John Locke, *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, edited by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979).

2 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), cited as T in the text.

3 David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding in Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 3rd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), cited as EHU in the text.

4 John P. Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 92 and 103. Wright repeats both claims in his more recent paper "Hume's Rejection of the Theory of Ideas," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 8 (1991): 149-162; at 150 Wright argues that Hume in one passage endorses the inference from inconceivability to impossibility, and at 152 he argues that Hume rejected the inference in the case of absolute space.

5 I shall not, in this paper, be so much concerned with the philosophical merits of these principles, as with whether Hume accepted them. An excellent discussion of the former can be found in Paul Tidman, "Conceivability as a Test for Possibility," *American Philosophical Quarterly* 31 (1994): 297-309; and Stephen Yablo, "Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?" *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 53 (1993): 1-42.

6 David Hume, *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published in A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978), cited as A in the text.

7 For Hume, a proposition is absolutely possible if and only if it does not imply a contradiction. He certainly does not think that a contradiction is at all possible, and at EHU 25 (quoted above) he seems to hold that if a proposition does not imply a contradiction then it is possible (since the reason why the contrary of every matter of fact is possible is that it does not imply a contradiction). This entails that the existence of an object is absolutely possible if and only if the existence of the object is not contradictory. Since Hume also speaks of objects as being absolutely possible or impossible, we can ascribe to him the principle that an object is absolutely possible if and only if it is non-contradictory.

8 The fact that Hume holds that objects, events, and propositions are all the sorts of things that can be conceived causes some problems in exposition. Hume switches back and forth between these freely (for example, we see all three in the course of two pages in his *Abstract* of the *Treatise* [A 652-653]). For simplicity, I shall normally talk of conceiving objects, though at times it will be necessary to mention conceiving propositions.

9 Arthur Pap, *Semantics and Necessary Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1958), 80-81. Other examples include: Tidman, 297; Albert Casullo, "Reid and Mill on Hume's Maxim of Conceivability," *Analysis* 39 (1979): 212; R. F. Atkinson, "Hume on Mathematics," *David Hume: Critical Assessments*, vol. III, edited by Stanley Tweyman (New York: Routledge, 1995), 5; Robert Fendel Anderson, *Hume's First Principles* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1966), 5. In the case of Anderson, he is not explicit in attributing this principle to Hume, but from his statements it is clear that he does (e.g. "if we can conceive only of perceptions, then according to Hume's principle it is only perceptions whose existence we may regard as possible"). As was noted earlier (n. 4), John P. Wright states that Hume employs this principle, but Wright thinks that Hume ultimately rejects it.

10 This is clear just by looking at the larger passage from which this quote is taken. Hume moves immediately from speaking of conceiving, to imagining, to forming an idea.

11 Descartes, for instance, repeatedly uses the example of a mountain without a valley. In Meditation V, he states "it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without a valley" (René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy in The Philosophical Writings of Descartes*, vol. II, translated by John Cottingham, Robert Stoothoff, and Dugald Murdoch [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984], 46; AT VII 66). So for Descartes a mountain without a valley is a contradictory object. *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* are hereafter cited as CSM.

12 These instances occur at T 19-20, 32 (twice), 39, 43, 63, 79-80, 87, 89, 95, 111, 190, 228, 233, 236, 245, and 250. There are a few cases in the *Treatise* where Hume mentions inconceivability and impossibility together, without clearly inferring one from the other; four of these are at T 161-162, 230, 236, and 243.

13 These occur in the *Abstract* at 650, 651, and 653, and in the *Enquiry* at 25, 35, 48, and 157. In the case of the *Enquiry*, Hume tends to state that whatever is conceivable does not imply a contradiction. It seems clear, though, that for Hume something is absolutely possible if and only if it does not imply a contradiction (see n. 7).

14 Robert J. Fogelin, "Hume and Berkeley on the Proofs of Infinite Divisibility," *Philosophical Interpretations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 45-69; George S. Pappas, "A Second Copy Thesis in Hume?" *Hume Studies* 17. 1 (1991): 51-59.

15 To be precise, though, different early modern philosophers seem to have meant somewhat different things by 'adequate idea' and 'adequate knowledge'. Descartes states that "if a piece of knowledge is to be *adequate* it

must contain absolutely all the properties which are in the thing which is the object of knowledge" (*Objections and Replies* in CSM vol. II, 155; AT VII, 220). Spinoza states "By adequate idea I understand an idea which, insofar as it is considered in itself, without relation to an object, has all the properties, or intrinsic denominations of a true idea" (Benedictus Spinoza, *Ethics in The Collected Works of Spinoza*, translated by Edwin Curley (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), II def. 4). For Locke adequate ideas are those "which perfectly represent those Archetypes, which the Mind supposes them taken from; which it intends them to stand for, and to which it refers them" (Locke, 375). According to Leibniz, "if every element included in a distinct concept is again distinctly known, and if the analysis is carried through to the end, then the knowledge is *adequate*" (Gottfried W. Leibniz, "Reflections on Knowledge, Truth, and Ideas," *Leibniz Selections*, edited by Philip P. Wiener [New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1951], 285).

Descartes and Spinoza have it that an adequate idea contains all the properties of its object. By 'property' they probably mean essential property, since this is how the term was used in the seventeenth century; in the *Port Royal Logic* we find "An idea is called a *property* with respect to some species when the idea is an idea of an essential characteristic of the inferiors of that species but is not the primary idea considered in the essence of the inferiors but rather an idea dependent upon the primary one" (Antoine Arnauld, *The Art of Thinking: Port-Royal Logic*, translated by James Dickoff and Patricia James [New York: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1964], 54). Locke has it that an adequate idea represents every aspect of its object. For Leibniz, an adequate idea is one whose every part (and the whole) can be distinguished from everything else. Under any of these characterizations, though, it is reasonable that one would hold the principle that any feature of an adequate idea is also a feature of its object.

16 Worded this way, the conclusion may sound trivially true. We can avoid this triviality, though, if we read "most minute parts of extension" as "most minute perceived parts of extension," and take Hume to be discussing the minimal impressions mentioned in T I ii 1.

17 Pappas, 52.

18 In the first *Enquiry*, Hume does use the term 'knowledge' in a much broader sense, but it is a section of the *Treatise* that we are interpreting, and in the *Treatise* Hume's views on knowledge are more narrow.

19 This is in the sense that an idea of gold and an idea of a mountain can be united to form an idea of a golden mountain, and that an idea of roundness and an idea of a square cannot be united to form an idea of a round square.

20 Hume never gives an account of what he means by a clear and distinct idea, but it seems, given what Hume says in connection with distinctness, that an idea is clear and distinct just in case it can (absolutely) exist apart from everything else (see T 222). The reason the Conceivability Principle is restricted to clear and distinct ideas seems to be in order to exclude abstract ideas. Abstract ideas, such as the idea of the color of a marble apart from its shape, are not distinct (a distinction of reason is not a true distinction for Hume); Hume does not think that a color without a shape is possible (see T 25).

21 A little later, Hume states that "we can form no idea of a vacuum" (T 53).

22 Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989); Donald W. Livingston, *Hume's Philosophy of Common Life* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984); Wright, *Sceptical Realism*. Other authors who have made similar claims include: Janet Broughton, "Hume's Ideas about Necessary Connection," *Hume Studies* 13. 2 (1987): 217-44; Michael J. Costa, "Hume and Causal Realism," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 67 (1989): 172-90.

23 I myself do not hold that Hume believes in secret real powers. For an attack on the secret powers interpretation, see Kenneth P. Winkler, "The New Hume," *The Philosophical Review* 100 (1991): 541-579.

24 One might wonder, if inconceivability is not, for Hume, an indication of something's impossibility, then what is? The answer is that, for Hume, one can gain knowledge of an impossibility by forming two ideas and realizing that the relation of contrariety holds between their objects. This seems to be what happens in the second paragraph of T I ii 2, discussed earlier.

25 By having "all possible simple ideas," I mean having a simple idea for every possible simple object (where a simple idea or object is one that is indivisible). This would include any possible simple object that is specifically different from perceptions. This strong notion is what is required to allow the inference from inconceivability to impossibility.

26 See n. 7.

27 I do not mean to suggest that the completely idealized notion of conceivability and this psychological notion are the only two possible interpretations. Rather, they are the two most worth discussing, the former because it alone validates the Inconceivability Principle, and the latter because it is the notion Hume uses, as we shall see.

28 But even though we may all have this ideal power, some people may realize it better than others. It seems that some people, such as artists, are better at using their imaginations. This is consistent with Hume's claims. We can all have the same power, but differ in the degree to which we have become skilled at exercising it. Most everyone can perform multiplication, but some are more adept at doing it.

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