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ON HUME'S IDEA OF EXISTENCE

In the Part IX of the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Demea presents his a priori argument of God's necessary existence. Cleanthes then proceeds to offer a number of criticisms of this argument, most of which are based on the Humean claim that whatever we conceive as existent we can also conceive as non-existent. The argument is as follows:

- (i) «There is an evident absurdity in pretending to demonstrate a matter of fact, or to prove it by any arguments *a priori*».
- (ii) «Nothing is demonstrable, unless the contrary implies a contradiction».
- (iii) «Nothing, that is distinctively conceivable, implies a contradiction».
- (iv) «Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent».
- (v) «There is no Being, therefore, whose non-existence implies a contradiction».
- (vi) Consequently there is no Being, whose existence is demonstrable». (*Dialogues*, p. 90)

The same argument is formulated in the first *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*:

- (i') «All other enquiries of men regard only matter of fact and existence; and these are evidently incapable of demonstration».
- (iv') «Whatever is may *not be*».
- (v') «No negation of fact can involve a contradiction».
- (iii') «The non-existence of any being, without exception, is as clear and distinct an idea as its existence. The proposition, which affirms it not to be, however false, is no less conceivable and intelligible, than that which affirms it to be» (*Enquiries*, p. 164)

The main question of this paper is how do the premises (iv) and (iv') fit with another Hume's claim:

«There is no impression nor idea of any kind, of which we have any consciousness or memory, that is not conceive'd as existent». (*Treatise*, p. 66)

or

«Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent». (*Treatise*, p. 67)

In addition, does it follow from the above mentioned claim, that whatever we conceive necessarily exists? If we take Hume to hold that everything necessarily exists, how then is this consistent with the basic, and textually well supported, Hume's view that no matter of fact or existence can be logically true? More precisely, how is the claim, that «whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent related to the premise (iv), the conclusions (v), (vi), and the consequence drawn from it: «the words, necessary existence, have no meaning» (*Dialogues*, P. IX, p. 149).

In order to attempt to answer these questions, and to interpret what the quoted claims amount to, there is a prior requirement of understanding Hume's characterization of the idea of existence and of clarifying whether he contends that there is no distinct idea of existence.

Hume's reference to existence and non-existence is explicitly made, for the first time in the context of «relations», where he says that they «are plainly resembling, as implying both of them an idea of the object». (*Treatise*, p. 15) Another reference is made in the relevant section «Of the idea of existence, and of external existence», where it is definitely declared that the «idea of existence is not derived from any particular impression». (*Treatise*, p. 66) Hence, taking into account of his «first principle», we may imply that this concept is obtained by abstraction. His positive claim is as follows:

«The idea existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. The idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent». (*Treatise*, pp. 66-67).

Hume's view of the concept of existence is one of the more obscure parts of his philosophy, and obviously is closely related with his doctrine of abstract ideas. According to Hume, we think in terms of ideas, our capacity to think generally is a matter of having abstract ideas, and what is conceivable is possible. At these points, he follows the views of his predecessors such as Locke, Descartes and the Port Royal logicians. However, Hume differs from them in his account of what precisely an abstract idea is.

The traditional view was that one forms the abstract idea of a specific property - like white - by separating that specific property from the concrete particulars presented to him; and one forms generic abstract ideas - like that of being coloured or extended figu-

re - by separating the generic property from the specific one. These abstract, general or universal ideas signify many particulars by signifying properties in those particulars. Nevertheless, these properties do not exist independently of those particulars¹.

The consistency of this view is challenged by Berkeley² and by Hume. The latter one says that if something is «absurd in *fact and reality*, it must be absurd *in idea*: since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible» *Treatise*, pp. 19-20). The basic idea is that, since it is impossible to form an idea an object possessing of quantity and of quality, but not possessing precise degree of either, in the same way there is an equal impossibility of forming an idea, that is not confined in both these particulars. Consequently, his conclusion is that abstract ideas must be particular ideas:

«Abstract ideas are therefore in themselves individual, however they may become general in their representation». (*Treatise*, p. 20)

Since the traditional doctrine, which Hume adopts, views the general ideas in terms of using general terms - being associated with abstract ideas-, then it must be explained how words come to be general. Hume denies that we form the idea of existence by separation attempting to avoid the difficulties of the traditional doctrine of abstraction. In this, he goes beyond Berkeley in attempting to provide a positive account of abstract ideas.

The problem to be solved is how an idea that is particular becomes abstract. Inasmuch as the capacity of the mind is not infinite how does this idea signify many particulars, so that all of them to be present to the mind? Hume answers that the impressions and the ideas that an abstract idea signifies:

«are not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power». (*Treatise*, p. 20)

F. Wilson plausibly suggests that interpretation points out «these abstract ideas as such are habits or dispositions»³. Hume's acco-

1. Cf. J. Locke, *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Niddith, Oxford, 1975, 2, 3.1, 12.1, 21.73, and 3, 6.32, 3.11., and Arnauld and Nicole, *La Logique de Port-Royal*, ed. Jourdain, Paris 1854, 1, 5, 6.

2. Cf. G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, in *The Works of G. Berkeley*, ed. Luce and Jessop, vol. 2, London 1948-57, Intr. 8-10.

3. F. Wilson, «Hume on the Abstract Idea of Existence: Comments on Cummins' «Hume on the Idea of Existence»», *Hume Studies*, vol. xvii, n. 2, 1991 pp.

unt of how a word becomes general depends upon his associationist psychology. Since Hume understands the notion of causation in terms of association based on the relation of contiguity, abstract ideas are to be understood in terms of association based on the relation of resemblance. A word comes to be associated with ideas and impressions insofar as they are associated with one another via some resemblance relation. In Hume's words:

«When we have found a resemblance among several objects, ...we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality... the word raises up an individual idea, along with a certain custom; and that custom produces any other individual one, for which we have occasion». (*Treatise*, pp. 20-21)

So, what about the idea of existence? Hume has allowed, as Locke¹ and Descartes² have, that we do in fact have 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; and 'tis evident, that from this consciousness the most perfect idea and assurance of *being* is deriv'd.» (*Treatise*, p. 66)

Concerning the nature of the abstract idea of existence the relevant doctrine of Locke and Descartes is that abstraction is a result of separation; the abstract idea of existence is obtained by separating existence from some existent thing. But, as Locke also holds, what is possible in thought is possible in reality. Now, a serious problem emerges. Insofar as what is possible in thought is possible in reality, then it would be possible to separate a thing from its existence in reality as well. It would seem possible to have in reality things that do not exist. If there was a separable idea of existence, then one would be able to confer whatever existence without reason³.

167-201. P. Cummins, «Hume on Idea of Existence», *Hume Studies*, vol. xvii, n. 1, 1991, pp. 61-82. For a similar with Wilson's interpretation, see S. Tweyman, «Some Reflections on Hume on Existence», vol. yviii, n. 2, 1992 pp. 137-149.

1. Cf. J. Locke, *Essay*, 2. 7.7.

2. Cf. R. Descartes, *Philosophical Writings, Replies*, ed. J. Cottingham, Stoothoff and Murdoch, Cambridge 1985, 1:117.

3. Also, Berkeley, in his defence of idealism, recognizes the dangers of having a separable idea of existence. Cf. G. Berkeley, *Principles of Human Knowledge*, sec. 80-81.

Examining the nature of the idea of existence and the absurd consequences of the separability thesis, Hume asserts that judgements, like that a thing exists, cannot consist of joining two separable ideas, one of thing and one of existence:

«if belief consisted merely in a new idea, annex'd to the conception, it would be in a man's power to believe what he pleas'd». (*Treatise*, pp. 623-24)

and consequently, his conclusion is that the abstract idea of existence cannot be distinguished and separable from the ideas of particular objects:

«we have no abstract idea of existence, distinguishable and separable from the idea of particular objects». (*Treatise*, p. 623)

Yet, it should be noticed that while Hume does not accept that the idea of existence is separable from the idea of particular objects or things, he does not deny that we form an abstract idea of existence. While Berkeley rejects abstract ideas, Hume understands the sort of abstraction that is involved in forming the idea of existence. Since, as Hume says, «the idea of existence is not deriv'd from any particular impression», a possible solution would be that the abstract idea of existence belongs to the case in which we form the abstract idea of a species apart from particular things, or a genus apart from a species. As it has been already said, for Hume this sort of abstraction is not a matter of separation, but one of association based on resemblance. The species is not separable from the particular, nor the genus from the species; in other words the existence is not separable from the existent things.

For the tradition within which Hume is located, being or existence is the genus that can be predicated of all things, and includes all less comprehensive genera within it. According to this view, being or existence must be a predicate¹. It is a genus parallel to genera such as extension or thought differing only in being that genus which comprehends all things and includes within itself all lesser genera. Also, all things of which we are aware are qualified or modified; so in this respect, they all resemble each other. This resemblance re-

1. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, Berlin 1911.

lation is the basis of the association that constitutes the idea of existence¹.

More over, according to Arnauld and Nicole, a thing is an independent existence, and Hume refers to this controversial definition of a substance as «*something which may exist by itself*» (*Treatise*, p. 233) saying that, «as far as this definition explains a substance», impressions and ideas are entities that satisfy this definition; what is different or distinct is disquishable and whatever is distinguishable is separable². Impressions have determinate or specific characteristics; so these are all qualified entities. For these reasons they «may by consider'd as separately existent, and exist separately». (*Treatise*, p. 233) We have two abstract ideas: this one of an existent thing and an other one of existence. But these ideas are inseparable because everything falling under the former idea also falls under the later. Hence, «Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent». (*Treatise*, p. 67).

However, what is the relation between the idea of existence, and non-existence? Hume says that the idea of non-existent thing is self-contradictory:

«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». (*Treatise*, p. 15)

So, why can we imply the idea of the object in the first case and not in the second one? A possible explanation of Hume's claim could be that the judgment that an object exists or is existent consists in joining the idea of an object to the abstract idea of existence. In contrast, the judgment that an object is non-existent consists in separating the idea of an object from the abstract idea of existence. For Hume the first judgment consists of a single particular idea. When he criticises the traditional division of mental acts into conception, judgement and reasoning, he clarifies that:

1. Cf. Locke, *Essay*, 2, 7.1, 7, 18, 19.1, 2, 12.4, 5, and 4. 10. 3. Arnauld and Nicole, *Logique*, 1, 2, and Descartes, *Prnciples, in Philosophical Writings*, vol. 1, 1. 56, 65. and S. Clarke, *A Discoorse Concerning the Being and Attributes of God, the Obligations of Naural Religion, and the Truth and Certainty of the Cristian Religion*, ed. 6th. 16.

2. Also cf. *Treatise*, p. 18.

'tis far from being true, that in every judgement, 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... 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». (*Treatise*, pp. 96-97, n.)

According to Hume in the case of non-existence we try the impossible. If it is true that when the idea of an object is represented in consciousness by a particular idea, this is of some specific kind, and since an object modified is an object that exists, then the judgement of non-existent attempts to separate from the idea of existence an idea that is necessarily tied to the idea of existence. But doesn't it seem odd that necessarily every thing exists?

Then, coming to the main question, whether we can take Hume to hold that everything necessarily exists, we have to consider the relevant notions of necessity. According to Hume, who agrees with Descartes, whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. So, in a sense, necessarily every thing exists. But Descartes adds, while necessarily every thing exists, not every thing is a necessary existent, that is to say: there is one thing the existence of which can be demonstrated¹. This is what Hume insists upon when he asserts that:

«no matter of fact is capable of being demonstrated» (*Treatise*, p. 463)

So, if one is to understand Hume as, in a sense, meaning that necessarily every thing exists, this sense has to be that whatever thing we conceive, we conceive as existent; or in other words, if we conceive some thing we conceive it as existent.

Apart from Descartes, Hume in holding that no matter of fact could be demonstrated (*Treatise*, pp. 76-84), was opposing Locke and Clarke. Their pretension was that we cannot suppose that the chain of dependent beings is caused by nothing, and the conclusion of their argument was that a necessary being exists². It must be noticed that the notions of «necessity» and, correspondingly, of «contingency» are part of the context of causal discourse. The «Necessary-existing» is the «Self-Existent» in the sense that it itself is the «cause of its existence», and since it is eternal has the sort of causal

1. Cf. Descartes, *Replies*, 1: 117.

2. Cf. Clarke, *Discourse*, 12-14, and Locke, *Essay*. 4. 10.3.

power that prevent any other cause from destroying that being. On the other hand, the causal power of the contingently existent is such that there is not contradiction in supposing that it has its power and yet does not exist. The notions of necessity and contingency refer to different kinds of cause and causal power and not to different kind of existence. The necessarily existent is logically incompatible with the non-existence of the thing. The contingently existent is compatible with its non-existence. So, the notion of necessary existence involves the notions of causal power and this of logical contradictory. The notion of contingent existence involves an other notion of causal power and that of logical incompatibility.

The Locke-Clarke argument is presented by Demea in Part IX of the *Dialogues*:

«What was it then, 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 necessary existent Being, who carries the REASON of his existence in himself; and who cannot be supposed not to exist without an express contradiction». (*Dialogues*, p. 91)

Here, the necessity of a necessary existent consists in its containing within itself the reason for its being, that is the cause for its being, and continuing to be; for Demea it is a matter of the causal relation between the thing and its being. Then, Cleanthes's reply to this argument contains as its premise the following controversial proposition:

«Whatever we conceive as existent, we can also conceive as non-existent»
(*Dialogues*, p. 91)

Put in context, this suggests that we can conceive no thing with causal powers that are such that they are logically incompatible with the non-existence of the thing. And this is because Cleanthes a little further will say that there does not seem to be any reason why the material universe cannot 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 it's non-existence appear as great a contradiction as that twice two is five». (*Di-*

alogues, p. 92) 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». (*Dialogues*, p. 91) The ideas that we have are derived from our impressions, and Hume asserts that we have not impressions, nor any ideas of things with such causal qualities¹. The ideas are distinct, logically distinct, and so separable.

On the other hand, «the idea of existence», Hume says, «is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent»; hence, «whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent». (*Treatise*, pp. 66-67) This seems to mean that whenever we conceive a thing we also conceive, that there is a quality which is present in it. It is evident that this is a logical truth, since it «is a contradiction in terms» to say «for the same thing both to be and not to be» (*Treatise*, p. 19). and «every object, that is presented, must necessarily be existent». (*Treatise*, p. 67) But if this claim is indeed a logically necessary truth, does it follow that existence is a necessary predicate of every thing?

According to the above interpretation concerning abstract ideas and the inseparability criterion, in order to establish that a truth is necessary it suffices to show that the two abstract ideas involved are inseparable. Conversely, a truth is not necessary if the abstract ideas are separable. So, inseparability is the criterion of logical necessity. This is the case about ideas that are different yet inseparable, as figure and colour are. (*Treatise*, p. 24) When Hume says «all ideas, which are different, are separable», he refers to things. Here, the doctrine applies to particular impressions and ideas. The previous doctrine, that some ideas that are different yet inseparable, refers to abstract ideas, and abstract ideas are not things: they are dispositions².

1. See also in Hume's arguments on Causal Maxim, *Treatise*, pp. 79-80: «As 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 one».

2. Another question is whether the distinction between abstract ideas, existence and existent thing, is a «distinction of reason». Is there distinction of reason between a thing and its existence? For the function of distinction of reason, see *Treatise*, pp. 24-25. The phrase «distinctio rationis ratiocinatae» derives from F. Suarez, *On the Various Kinds of Distinctions, from Disputationes Metaphysi-*

How can that be reconciled with the other claim that no matter of fact is necessary, and that the existence of every thing is contingent? It is essential to note again that the discussion on necessary vs contingent matters of fact take place, as we have seen, in the context of causal discourse. There are different kinds of necessity. So if the proposition «whatever is a thing exists» or «whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent» is a necessary truth, in a sense that is quite compatible with Hume's claim that matters of fact are not demonstrable, then Hume claims that there are not necessary beings. Consequently, if we locate Hume in the tradition of the «philosophy of substance» perhaps the problem becomes less mysterious.

Since Cleanthes argues that the non-existence of the Deity is conceivable, that is to say: i) the existence of the Deity is not demonstrable, ii) we cannot understand what is meant by «the Deity's necessary existence», and iii) matter may be the necessarily existent being as the cause of the contingent.

For those like Demea who claim to find the non-existence of the Deity inconceivable, Cleanthes's criticism has the force of counterbalancing it, but does not refute Demea's position. Since each claim is introspective, the claims seem to have equal weight. Cleanthes simply shows to Demea that the latter has failed to examine alternative views like the one he presents and attempts to defend in part IX¹.

cae, Disputatio 7, trans. C. Vollert, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, 1947, 7, pp. 19-20, 60, 41. See also, Descartes, *Principles*, 1.62. In that Cummins says that existence, existent thing, is not the case of distinction of reason. Cummins, op. cit. p. 77. Wilson disagrees with him, saying that it is the case of distinction of reason. Wilson, op. cit. pp. 190-91.

1. This is Tweyman's interpretation, op. cit. p. 144, and in Tweyman, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, Routledge 1991, pp. 1-94. For a similar view see J. Gaskin, «Hume's Critique of Religion», *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, 14, 1 (1976), pp. 301-311, and *Hume's Philosophy of Religion*, Mac Millan, 1982, p. 92, and G. J. Hughes, *The Nature of God*, Routledge, 1995, pp. 5-9, 17-19.

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