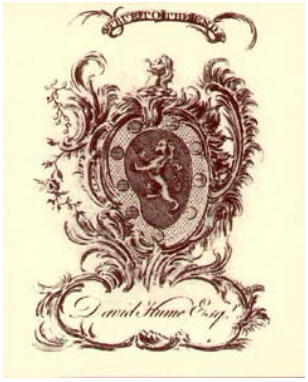

Hume's Missing Shade of Blue Re-viewed
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It is obviously important for Hume's purposes in the *Treatise* to maintain that simple ideas are always founded in precedent, resembling impressions;[1] and he explicitly, over and over, does so,[2] even sometimes being so carried away by this first principle of his science of man (T 7) or so careless as to say that not just all simple ideas but all ideas are founded in precedent, resembling impressions.[3] At the same time, as often noted, Hume explicitly maintains that it is possible for there to be a simple idea having no precedent, corresponding impression. He argues:

> *There is however one contradictory phaenomenon, which may prove, that 'tis not absolutely impossible for ideas to go before their correspondent impressions ... Suppose ... a person to have enjoyed his sight for thirty years, and to have become perfectly well acquainted with colours of all kinds, excepting one particular shade of blue ... Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be plac'd before him ... Now I ask, whether 'tis possible for him, from his own imagination, to supply this deficiency, and raise up to himself the idea of that particular shade, tho' it had never been conveyed to him by his senses? I believe there are few but will be of opinion that he can; and this may serve as a proof, that the simple ideas are not always derived from the correspondent impressions.* (T 5)

Now just prior to this concession (as Cummins calls it[4]), Hume has said that

> *the **full** examination of this question* [the causal relationship between ideas and impression] *is the subject of the present treatise; and therefore we shall here content ourselves with establishing one general proposition, **That all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.*** (T 4)

And just after the same concession, that a simple idea may be raised up which does not have a prior, correspondent impression, Hume says that *it still remains true, that all our simple ideas proceed either mediately or immediately, from their correspondent impressions* (T 7).

Thus we have Hume explicitly asserting, it seems, both that all simple ideas have precedent correspondent impressions and that they do not. But this, on the face of it, is an arrant contradiction! Can Hume have Homerically nodded? We have been quoting from the *Treatise*, but Hume makes the very same contradictory-seeming claims in the *Enquiry*![5] A thinker of Hume's acumen might nod for a page or two's quarter hour but not for all of nine years! Moreover, in both places Hume refers to the phenomenon of the impression-less idea of blue as a *contradictory phenomenon*, indicating clearly enough that he was himself aware of there seeming to be an inconsistency here in his contentions.

What can possibly be going on? Is Hume deliberately being paradoxical? Perhaps trying, for sensation's sake, to shock the reader and so increase sales of his work, as some commentators in the past might have wished to say?[6] But this would be at the expense of his own contentions and principles and not the reader's, and not even Hume's bitterest foes and most malicious critics — so far as I know — have ever proposed that Hume would, figuratively speaking, like Oedipus, gouge out his own eyes, even in order to increase sales of the *Treatise*, nor does it make the slightest sense to think he would.

The mystery deepens when we remember that Hume has said, in defining the program of the *Treatise*, that his intention is to establish the one general proposition that ***all our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them*** (T 4). What a strange way, we want to exclaim, to show that all our simple ideas are derived from correspondent simple impressions by almost immediately afterwards arguing that it is possible to have an idea that has had no correspondent, precedent impression! Such an egregious *non sequitur* might be expected of an absolutely incompetent beginner in philosophy, but we are speaking of David Hume, generally recognized as the profoundest and most acute of all British philosophers!

Might it be, as I have overheard one colleague of mine onetime say, that Hume in his "concession" is deliberately but surreptitiously constructing an opening in his empiricistic redoubt to allow, as it were, entrance to a Trojan horse of innate truths of reason? In support of such an interpretation one could argue that instincts play an underlying and crucial role in Hume's analysis of human knowledge and human thought.[7] Instincts by definition are innate; and so (one might ask) would not instincts, given verbal expression, amount to truths of

reason? But if this were Hume's intention in his concession, the entire subsequent line of exposition and argument in the *Treatise* would have had to have been different from what it is to possess any coherence whatsoever. Hume's subsequent analysis of the idea of necessary connection, for instance, would have had to base itself in the rationalist manner on innate truths of reason such as "Every event must have a cause"; whereas, in fact, this and other purported truths of reason are subjected to an empiricistic analysis appealing to sensuous experience and Humean impressions.[8] Thus, such an explanation would be worse than no explanation at all insofar as making sense of the concession goes.

An initially more plausible attempt to make sense of what we have called — following Cummins — Hume's "concession" is to be found in Cummins' own approach to the problem in "The Missing Shade of Blue."[9] Cummins, with some acknowledgement to Jonathan Bennett,[10] attempts to provide an interpretation of "having an idea" that converts Hume's concession from something exceptional and at odds with experience and empirical understanding into something non-exceptional and congenial with experience and empirical understanding. If we identify Hume's "having an idea of X" with something like "having a capacity to recognize X" instead of, say, a mirror image, then, Cummins argues, it is indisputably clear that we can have an idea of, say, a shade of blue without its precedent impression. We need only set up certain relevant conditions — indeed, those that Hume specifies — as conditions for recognizing a shade of blue as opposed to conditions for having a mirror image and we shall — no problem — recognize what we are presented with as the shade of blue in question (MSB 561).

Unfortunately, while this approach of Cummins' turns Hume's concession into something non-exceptional and plausible taken by itself, and in that regard makes sense of it, it fails utterly to make sense of that concession's relationship to the first principle of Hume's science of man, that all simple ideas have precedent, correspondent impressions. One might put the present objection this way: Cummins' interpretation converts Hume's having an impression-less idea of a shade of blue into a non-contradictory phenomenon, whereas Hume himself is insistent that it is a contradictory one. The question therefore remains: just how are we to understand or make sense or coherency of Hume's concession?

As a first step in answering this question we might ask what can possibly be Hume's purpose in not only making the concession under discussion but placing it where he does, just astraddle (as it were) his very postulation of his first principle of the science of man that all simple ideas have precedent correspondent impressions. Patently, Hume thinks it is important to introduce the concession just where it

has to appear to contradict the first principle in question. What can possibly be his motive for doing so? Surely it is the following.

The science of man, in Hume's view, is an empirical science, resting on sensuous observations and experience, and not, like the strict sciences, such as arithmetic, on mere relations of ideas. Now, if the science of man or the science of human nature's principles, and its first principle in particular, expressed relations of ideas and thus constituted strict science, those principles would be *a priori* true or false, and if true, preclude any possibility of an exception's being conceived; just as, presumably, one cannot conceive of an exception to the proposition, "all bachelors are unmarried." On the other hand, it is always possible, according to Hume, to conceive an exception or contradiction to an experientially-founded proposition or principle. Indeed, he constantly argues that such-and-such a proposition is not an *a priori* or necessary proposition by citing the fact that we can conceive of an exception or contradiction to it.[11] Thus, he has to be concerned, right off, with showing that his first principle, that all simple ideas have precedent, correspondent impressions, has a conceivable exception and thus that it is not *absolutely impossible* (T 5) that there be a simple idea without a precedent, correspondent impression. By doing so, he can at once lay to rest the possible objection that the first principle of his empirical science of man is not an empirical proposition but merely a definitional proposition of some sort and so possessing no more claim to our assent as a proposition about actual beings in the actual world than the proposition that all witches are servants of Satan.

Since the first principle of Hume's science of man is in effect a categorical universal affirmative statement, the citing of an exception to it has to constitute the citing of a contradiction (to the A statement, an O statement). So much is clear. But does it follow that Hume is really contradicting himself in this concession of his? Although he speaks of a *contradictory phenomenon*, he is speaking only of a **conceivable** contradictory phenomenon; and that this phenomenon is merely one that is conceivable simply because the proposition, "all simple ideas have precedent, correspondent impressions," is an empirical and not an *a priori* necessary proposition alters what Hume is claiming in his concession entirely. In particular, while he is claiming in his first principle that in fact all simple ideas have precedent, correspondent impressions, he is not claiming in his concession that in fact some simple ideas are without precedent, correspondent impressions.

One might profitably compare Hume's views in the present regard with Descartes' on essence and existence. According to Descartes, essence and existence are always, at least insofar as God is not concerned, "separable."[12] Thus, in imagining a triangle (says Descartes) he conceives its essence; nonetheless, "there may nowhere in the world

be such a figure outside my thoughts."[13] In spite of some appearance to the contrary, Hume, I want to say, similarly maintains that ideas and their relations are separable from existence. Thus, what we discover in a thought experiment, like the color concession under discussion, really says nothing about what exists or does not exist in reality; it at most proves that a certain proposition, namely that stating that all simple ideas have correspondent, precedent impressions, is not an *a priori*, necessary proposition but a synthetic, *a posteriori* proposition. On the other hand, the proposition stating that all simple ideas have correspondent, precedent impressions, or the first principle of the science of man, does refer to what exists or does not exist in actual reality. Hence, being only in idea or in one's thought experiment a phenomenon, the phenomenon of the missing shade of blue projects merely the idea of a contradiction to the first principle of the science of man, not an instance of an actual exception to the first principle and, hence, not something actually falsifying that principle. Thus, without real inconsistency but only an apparent one, Hume is able both to maintain that all simple ideas have correspondent, precedent impressions and that a contradictory phenomenon can be conceived.

Our resolution of the present problem has rested on the claim that ideas, unlike impressions (we might add), are separable from existence. But in saying this we seem, certainly, to be riding rough-shod over Hume's own contentions — not, assuredly, something we have a license to do. For Hume explicitly says that ideas, and not just impressions, cannot be separated from existence. He says (Book 1, Part 2, Section 6 of the *Treatise*):

> *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 ... The idea of existence, then, is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent. To reflect on any thing simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other.* (T 66)

Do we not have here an explicit denial that ideas are separable from existence? And so does not our resolution of what might be called "the concession problem" utterly collapse?

It might seem so. What we have failed to do, however, and what Hume himself sanctions us doing, is to distinguish between ideas taken formally — that is, ideas taken simply as presentations to the mind — and ideas taken as representations. It is ideas in the former regard that are inseparable from existence; it is ideas in the latter regard — that is, as representations — that are separable from existence; and it is

ideas in the latter regard that alone pretend to describe things existing beyond themselves and hence "outside the mind" or in the real world. The first principle of the science of man refers to ideas just as they are copies or resemblances of things outside themselves; namely, the impressions from which they originate. Thus, it is only ideas taken as representations whose separability from existence is at stake.

But before I proceed further, let me substantiate my previous claim that Hume himself sanctions the division in ideas that I have proposed above. In Book 1, Part 3, Section 8 he says:

> *It may be said, that not only an impression may give rise to* [causal] *reasoning, but that an idea may also have the same influence* [to produce belief]*; especially upon my principle,* ***that all our ideas are deriv'd from correspondent impressions.*** *For suppose I form at present an idea, of which I have forgot the correspondent impression, I am able to conclude from this idea, that such an impression did once exist; and as this conclusion is attended with belief, it may be ask'd, from whence are the qualities of force and vivacity deriv'd, which constitute the belief? And to this I answer very readily,* ***from the present idea.*** *For as this idea is not here consider'd, as the representation of any absent object, but as a real perception in the mind, of which we are intimately conscious, it must be able to bestow on whatever is related to it the same quality, call it* ***firmness, or solidity, or force, or vivacity,*** *with which the mind reflects upon it, and is assur'd of its present existence.* (T 105-6)

An idea, then, taken formally or as it merely presents itself to the mind possesses, just like an impression of the senses, that vivacity or force which amounts to belief and the idea of existence. But, says Hume, we are then not considering the idea as *the representation of* [an] *absent object*. When it is so considered, then, presumably, as so considered, an idea does not possess the vivacity or force of an impression and thus does not of itself constitute belief or the idea of existence.

It is, indeed, on this basis that Hume's system is *prima facie* able to cohere with the common-sense fact that our dreams, fancies, and mere suppositions can be truly affirmed by us to exist. But, says Hume, we are not then considering our ideas as *the representation*[s] *of absent object*[s]. When so considered, our ideas presumably do not possess the vivacity or force of impressions and thus do not of themselves constitute belief or the property of existence.

There can be no doubt, then, that Hume nominally allows for the separation of ideas and existence as, indeed, he has to if he is to

maintain, as he often does, that ideas of the imagination are too feeble to amount to belief or existence. Moreover, by allowing for this separation he can detach, as he must if he is to avoid plain nonsense, thought-experiments and demonstrations of contingency from beliefs of matters of fact. Nonetheless, although we can now make sense of the missing-shade-of-blue concession in terms of Hume's intentions, at least two problems remain embedded in them that need resolution.

1. We may easily enough say with Hume that ideas taken formally possess the vivacity of impressions and as such amount to belief and existence, and that the same ideas taken as representations do not, but what is not so easy to see is how in terms of the mechanism of vivacity this difference in belief and existence can be explained. Here Hume, as far as any explicit explanation goes, remains silent. His very system being at stake here lets us see if any at all plausible explanation of this difference can be put together from the principles of the *Treatise*. I think it can be.

Presumably, any Humean explanation of the difference in question must take off from the premise that, in the case of an idea taken as a representation as opposed to an idea taken formally, or as it merely presents itself to the consciousness, the object denominated[14] is "absent" or external to our immediate consciousness. How, though, the object denominated can, in Hume's system, be absent or external to our immediate consciousness and yet be represented is by no means self-evident. But had Hume pursued the present problem, which he does not, he might have perhaps said something like the following.

In experience we constantly find ideas linked, as resemblances, to precedent impressions. This constant conjunction produces in us a propensity to take any idea for an idea **of** something resembling it and hence for a representation, even where in fact a precedent resembling impression is lacking, or no past conjunction between idea and previous impression, as in causal reasoning, has occurred. Thus, every idea [we continue to speak for Hume] presents, as it were, two faces to us: the one of itself as it formally is and the other as being "of" a resembling object. In the latter case the feeling of its being "of" a resembling object is, however, merely structural; for example, the particular structure whose one terminus is this mental redness (the idea taken formally) and whose other terminus is comprised, not by another idea or object but merely the object-less structure of our propensity to think "and **of** a resembling object." One might think here of Hume's analysis of general, abstract ideas, according to which the constant conjunction of, say, the word "red" with now this concrete mental redness and now that results in our propensity to think, given the word "red," now of this concrete instance of red and now of that one, without, however, there being or needing to be present to our minds a general, abstract object.

In the case of an idea taken as a representation, therefore, the denominated object, though denominated, may be absent and external to our consciousness (much as the meaning of a word may be general without there being present some sort of general, abstract object).[15] Thus, what must alone be believed and be believed to exist, each being immediately present to our consciousness and hence imbued with the requisite vivacity, is the idea as formally viewed and the idea as conjoined with the habit-based structure of being **of** a resembling something—in short, the idea as representation. But since in the latter case a mere structure, "this is of something resembling," replaces any denominated object, we are not forced to believe that there exists the denominated object. We are not because, in the present case, all that the vivacity of our consciousness can spread itself over[16] is the habit-based structure, whose extensional terminus is merely a variable and not a denominated object. The latter not being present to our consciousness, it cannot have vivacity spread over it, for how can one spread vivacity on nothing?

As I said, I think that Hume, if he had pursued the problem being dealt with (a form of the more general problem of how one can deny something's existence without implying its existence), might have attempted to take the route I have been outlining above. I should also propose that, basically resembling Hume's analysis of abstract, general ideas as it does,[17] the present account of how ideas and existence may be separated is quite as credible as Hume's analysis of abstract, general ideas. The only weakness I can see in either is how, as required by the dictate of Hume's system that everything present to the consciousness is a perception, a propensity, habit, or variable is to be reduced to a perception or set of perceptions. Except, though, for that one difficulty it seems to me that Hume's system provides an empiricistically plausible answer to the stubborn, semantic problem of non-existence, or, more accurately, as plausible an answer as philosophy can provide.

2. Two closely connected problems or questions arise concerning the thought experiment that Hume carries out and would have the reader carry out with regard to the missing shade of blue.

a) It might be complained that in spite of Hume's intentions and in spite of whatever distinction he might want to draw between ideas formally taken and ideas taken as representations, still the experiment concluding in his "concession" is a straight-forward, empirical experiment which, presumably, both he and ourselves are able to successfully conduct. Presumably, this experiment shows that in actual fact simple ideas do not always have precedent, correspondent impressions. But why, then, does Hume not jettison his first principle of the science of man? Has not the experiment itself falsified it?

b) It might be complained that the thought experiment of the concession, as described by Hume, very little resembles the experiment that in actuality would have to be carried out in order to prove that there can occur a simple idea lacking a precedent, correspondent impression.

For one thing, in order to insure that the subject of the experiment had never in fact previously had an impression of the shade of blue referred to in the experiment, we should have to close out that possibility. But how might we do that? The only conceivable way that we could, it seems to me, is if we located Berkeley's man born blind and made to see and located him just moments after being made to see. But now would a person born blind and just now made to see be able to have and identify an idea of his as the idea of the missing shade of blue in question? Would he even know what we were talking about in asking him if he did? It is impossible to think that he would. But the subject in Hume's experiment seems to know exactly what is being asked of him. He could be anyone of us, as indeed Hume himself supposes he might. But certainly there is no shade of blue, missing or otherwise, that I could say for sure that I had never previously had an impression of. And, lodging one of Hume's own sort of appeals, I appeal to the reader and ask if he can be sure he has not.

Both these problems or questions, a) and b) above, have a single answer, though not one that Hume explicitly provides us. Indeed, it might even deceptively seem that Hume himself thinks of his thought experiment as being a straight-forward, empirical experiment; but this really cannot be the case for then Hume, as we have pointed out it is clear to see, would have had to jettison the first principle of his science of man as having been falsified. And this being clear to see, Hume above all thinkers would have seen it. But, of course, he does not jettison his first principle. Clearly, therefore, Hume has to be conceiving the present thought-experiment as something different from a straight-forward, empirical experiment. He has to be thinking of it, as we said before, as an imaginary counter-example demonstrating that the first principle of his science of man is not an *a priori* or merely definitional truth but a genuine, contingent generalization. As such — a merely imaginary construction — it is not, like the conclusion of a causal reasoning, founded in constant conjunctions of impressions and hence does not establish actual matters of fact. It is all mere supposition or imagination. And for that reason it can replace the subject born blind and just now made to see with the mere further supposition — which is nothing more than that — that the shade of blue mentioned in the experiment is a shade of blue never experienced before by the subject. As a supposition about matters of fact this supposition can be entertained, for though it does contradict the first principle of Hume's science

of man it does not itself constitute a contradiction in terms, as it would have to if it projected an *a priori* impossibility.

It seems to me, accordingly, that there is a lesson intended by Hume in this thought experiment that goes beyond simply showing that the first principle of the science of man is a contingent, empirical principle and not an *a priori* or purely definitional one. This more hidden lesson or imputation is that with respect to establishing matters of actual fact or experience (in Hume, impressions), mere thought experiments, detached from legitimate causal reasoning, are not at all to be trusted. A "science of human nature" resting itself on such pure imaginings and hence building hypotheses on mere hypotheses would be that sort of futile pseudo-science of the older sort that Newton and the other innovative, successful scientists of the previous century had discarded in favor of the laboratory, numbers and quantities, and causal reasoning over instrumental observations. When in the title of the *Treatise* Hume advertises it as *An ATTEMPT to introduce the experimental Method of Reasoning INTO MORAL SUBJECTS*, the experimental method adverted to has to involve something like the experiment of pressing one's eyeball and seeing double, where actual impressions are causally reasoned over,[18] and not thought experiments like that of the imagined missing shade of blue. The latter, no more than the possibility of purely imagining that a billiard ball, when struck, rises straight up into the air, is calculated to inform us of what in fact is the case.

University of Colorado

1. For example, Hume bases his crucial analysis of the idea of necessary connection upon this first principle of his science of man. See David Hume, *Treatise*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1965), 155ff. Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
2. For example, in the passage referred to above, the principle is given the following form: *Upon this head I repeat what I have often had occasion to observe, that as we have no idea, that is not deriv'd from an impression, we must find some impression, that gives rise to this idea of necessity* (T 155).
3. See, for example T 155: *we have no idea, that is not deriv'd from an impression.* This, though, is a loose way of speaking. See T 3: *I find I have been carried away too far by the first appearance ... I observe, that many of our complex ideas never had impressions, that corresponded to them.*

4. See R. Cummins, "The Missing Shade of Blue," *The Philosophical Review* 87.4 (October 1978): 548. Although Cummins' intentions are in some respects different from my own, they overlap; see Cummins, 553.
5. David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1972), 20-21.
6. See, for instance, L. F. B. Kruse, *Hume's Philosophy in the Principle Works, the Treatise and in his Essays*, trans. Federspiel (London, 1939), 65. Kruse ascribes to Hume a flaw in his character: an inordinate desire for fame and for notoriety.
7. See, for instance, T 179: *reason is nothing but wonderful and unintelligible instinct in our souls.*
8. See, again, T 155ff.
9. Henceforth MSB.
10. MSB 553. Cummins does, however, have serious reservations regarding Bennett's treatment: MSB 551-4.
11. See, T 89: *We can at least conceive a change in the course of nature; which sufficiently proves, that such a change is not absolutely impossible* (as proving *that there can be no* ***demonstrative*** *arguments to prove,* ***that those instances, of which we have had no experience, resemble those, of which we have had experience***).
12. Rene Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Philosophical Works of Descartes*, trans. Haldane and Ross (Dover Publications, 1931), 1:181.
13. Descartes, 1:181.
14. T 20: *But to form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simply is the same thing; the reference of the idea to an object being an extraneous denomination, of which in itself it bears no mark or character.*
15. See T 22.
16. I owe the idea of consciousness providing vivacity in the present case to Stacy J. Hansen, "Hume's Impression of Belief," *Hume Studies* 14.2 (November 1988): 289, for example. As Hansen (p. 289) notes, Hume himself does not seem to be aware of this particular potential postulate of his system.
17. See T 22.
18. See T 210.