

A Study on Existence

A Study on Existence:

Two Approaches and a Deflationist Compromise

By

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To Jule

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PREFACE

My interest in the problem of existence was born from dissatisfaction with what I was hearing and reading on this topic as a philosophy student. Most philosophers endorsed the startling slogan that everything existed, yet were providing a rather plausible narrative to support it. Conversely, a small but raucous group of philosophers endorsed the rather plausible-sounding slogan that some things exist while others do not, yet provided an astonishing narrative to back it. I was thus naïve enough to think that it should be possible to have both: a plausible narrative and a plausible slogan. This led me to embark on writing a PhD thesis on the problem of existence, which—after some considerable revision—developed into this book.

Whereas some level of acquaintance with (modal) propositional and (modal) first-order logic might be helpful for some chapters (especially, Chapters 9, 10 and 11), this is not—by any means—required to follow the thread of the discussion. Besides the one between logic and philosophy, I have also tried to eschew another compartmentalization, namely the one between systematic and historical approaches. I hope philosophers focusing on either one of them might find some things of interest in this study.

While working on my thesis, and, later, on this book, I had the opportunity of being part of some very different, yet equally lively and welcoming intellectual communities: the Philosophy Department and the UMR “Savoirs, Textes, Langage” of the University of Lille 3, where I participated in different seminars and defended my PhD in January 2016 under the supervision of Shahid Rahman; the Philosophy Department of Seattle University, where I worked as a lecturer from 2009 to 2012; the Law Department and the Philosophy Department of the University of Constance, where I was a member of an interdisciplinary project between law and logic under the supervision of Matthias Armgardt from 2012 to 2015; and, finally, the Philosophy Department of the University of Geneva, where I am currently working in a project on the philosophy of Anton Marty directed by Laurent Cesalli and Kevin Mulligan.

Glancing back over these eventful years, I cannot but start by thanking Shahid Rahman. Without his guide and encouragement, I would never have dared to cross the dangerous waters of the riddle of existence. I

would also like to thank Burt Hopkins: my time as a lecturer at Seattle University in the Philosophy Department directed by him has been decisive to shape my approach to philosophy. I am equally most grateful to the members of my PhD thesis committee, which, besides the already mentioned Shahid Rahman, included Arkadiusz Chrudzimski, Claudio Majolino, Francesco Orilia and Juan Redmond. I hope that the present work does justice to at least some of their careful and helpful remarks. For their engaged and pleasant discussions, I am grateful to the students of two “existential” seminars (one at Seattle University and the other at the University of Constance). I would also like to thank the audiences at the *7th ECAP* (University of Milan, Italy, 1-6 September 2011), at the *14th CLMPS* (Nancy, France, 19-26 July 2011), at the *SIFA* conference (L’Aquila, Italy, 3-5 September 2014), and at the Workshop *Brentano in Early Analytic Philosophy* (Institut Jean Nicod, Paris, France, 20 October 2014, organized by Uriah Kriegel) where I presented parts of this work. Special thanks to Jochen Briesen, Eléonore Le Jallé, Tilman Süchting, and Emiliano Trizio for reading and commenting upon parts of this work, as well as to two anonymous reviewers for the journal *Argumenta*: if the final chapters of this study are to some extent successful, I owe it to their excellent comments. I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to Kallina Barclay Temperini for her patient linguistic revision of the final manuscript. Last but not least, great many thanks to Carlo Vita for his permission to expose some of his non-existent pebbles on the cover of this book.

Out of fear of presenting an incomplete list, I will not attempt to name all my friends and colleagues with whom I had countless and enjoyable exchanges—*bis auf eine Ausnahme*: thanks to Juliane Lippmann; no pun on the topic of this book might capture my gratefulness for your encouragement and your scrutinizing glances when confronted with the umpteenth solution to the puzzle of existence.

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“Whose Existence? A Compromise to the Fregean/Neo- Meinongian Divide.” *Argumenta*, 2, 1 (2016): 5–24.

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L'existence est ailleurs.

(André Breton, *Manifeste du Surréalisme*)

INTRODUCTION

The problem of existence is reputed to be one of the most intractable in philosophy, so that it does not pale even when compared to the mind-body problem. To avoid misunderstandings, however, we should hasten to point out that by the problem of existence philosophers do not mean the question as to why we, or for that matter, the universe exist, or where we come from, or where we are headed. To borrow the categories which have been applied to the mind-body problem, one may think of these questions as the soft problem of existence: if we are patient enough, one day (natural) science will provide us with the answers to these questions—and to a not negligible extent it has already done so. No, what philosophers mean by the problem of existence may be labeled as the hard problem: i.e., the question as to which place we should attribute to the notion of existence within our categorical grammar. More precisely, the issue in question is whether the notion of existence should be interpreted as expressing a property of objects (i.e., a first-order property, as opposed for instance to second-order ones), which would thus put it on a par with other garden-variety properties such as being round, being a circle, being heavy, etc.; or whether the term ‘existence’ and its cognates should be taken to express something radically different from a first-order property.

The question as to whether or not we should interpret existence as a property will guide us throughout this study (if not specified otherwise, by ‘property’ I mean ‘first-order property’). Yet evidently, in order to distinguish between the views according to which existence is a property from those that deny it, I must specify the notion of property at stake. Throughout this study, I rely on a conception of property borrowed from Frege’s “Dialogue with Pünjer” (Frege 1883?, 3; 14 [54; 62]): a property is something which enables us to divide the domain of objects into two classes—those that, circularly speaking, instantiate this property, and those that do not. Take, for instance, the rather uncontroversial property of being red: we can make sense of red as a property because we may use it to put certain objects under one column—i.e., the column of red objects—and the others under a different column—i.e., the column of objects that are not red. This is the characteristic I am going to rely upon to distinguish a property from what is not a property.

Besides spelling out the conception of property assumed by this study, it is crucial to distinguish between two different strategies one may rely upon to deny the property-status to existence. The first, more immediate one would be to argue for the fact that everything exists. Indeed, if everything existed, the notion of existence would not allow for any distinction within the domain of objects. A pleonastic property is, if not a *contradictio in adiecto*, something very different from the view of property at the heart of this study.¹ On the other hand, one might also argue that nothing exists and therefore existence is not a property, since—once again—we would not be able to rely on existence to draw a distinction within the domain of objects. This, however, seems to be rather an impervious road to follow: none of the philosophers addressed here ever ventured on it. Thus, I am not going to consider it as a viable strategy. Instead, a second viable strategy is the following: someone might argue that existence does not apply to objects, but rather, to something categorically different. Objects, then, would simply not be—so to speak—in the line of business of existence.

To sum up, we thus have an *a-* and a *b-strategy*, which we may rely upon in order to put forward a non-property view of existence. To return to the metaphors of the two columns, if one follows the *a-strategy*, no object will find a place in the column of non-existing objects; if one follows the *b-strategy*, the column of existence and the column of non-existence are to be filled in with something essentially other than objects. As we shall see, these two strategies need not be mutually exclusive, but they may actually complement one another instead.

The structure of this study is as follows. Part One focuses on the attempts at interpreting existence as something other than a property, developed by David Hume (Chapter 1), Immanuel Kant (Chapter 2), Franz Brentano (Chapter 3) and Gottlob Frege (Chapter 4). Part Two turns to the philosophers who have been most effective at arguing that existence should be considered a property of objects. These are Alexius Meinong (although—as will be seen—with due qualification) (Chapter 5), the Nuclear Neo-Meinongians Richard Routley, Terence Parsons and Dale Jacquette

¹ I would like to stress that this is just a matter of definition. I obviously do not wish to claim that, by endorsing this definition of property, I have refuted the approaches to existence as a formal or pleonastic property, as defended for instance by Salmon and Nakhnikian (1957), Salmon (1987), Williamson (1998; 2013), Mendelsohn (2005), Branquinho (2012) and, at least partially, Miller (1975; 1986) and Voltolini (2012). The only thing that follows, instead, is that, from the perspective taken by this study, such approaches are not considered as property-views of existence.

(Chapter 6), the Dual Copula Neo-Meinongians William Rapaport and Edward Zalta (Chapter 7), and the Modal Neo-Meinongian Graham Priest (Chapter 8). In the Interlude between the second and the third part, I address the family of free logics (Chapter 9). Finally, in Part Three, I develop a deflationist approach to existence first in the context of general statements (Chapter 10), then in the context of modal (Chapter 11), intentional (Chapter 12) and singular statements (Chapter 13). Paradoxically, I will argue here that there is no nature of existence, so that the term “existence” and its cognates express neither a property of objects nor any other substantive notion.

Historically—I should note—the non-property view may have found expression well before Hume and all the way back to Plato and Parmenides. Indeed, in a famous fragment (*On Nature*, fragment 2), Parmenides warned us that the path of non-being leads us nowhere—which may be interpreted as a poetic way of expressing the view that being is not a property. Metaphorically speaking, the path of non-red does lead to something, namely to objects which are not red, so that red may be deemed a property. But the path of non-being leads nowhere, since no object is without being. Thus, being is not a property, and, more precisely, it is not a property because everything exists (i.e., the a-strategy). Yet it is not at all clear whether Parmenides’ notion of being may be interpreted as existence—a problem which is inherited by Plato’s Parmenidean passages in the *Sophist* and other dialogues. For this reason, I avoid any attempt at interpreting these texts in the present study.

Another chapter in the history of philosophy that will not be addressed in the present study is the discussion by Aristotle and within the Aristotelian tradition on the distinction between essence and existence—a discussion which might also be reconstructed as a non-property view of existence (see Nelson 2012). As rich as this debate certainly was, it did not influence the philosophical discussion on existence of modern philosophy, and thus, in contemporary philosophy too, traces thereof are hard to find. As for many other philosophical problems, it seems that also here Descartes has been able to oblige those who came after him to think in other categories than the Aristotelian ones. As it happens, Hume is the first philosopher who has provided us with a clear formulation of the non-property view in modern philosophy—which is the reason this study opens with a chapter on him. Moreover, we will see how Kant, Brentano, and Frege have all followed in Hume’s footsteps to different extents.

The property view of existence may be traced back before Meinong as well. For instance, precursors of this position may be found in Thomas Reid (see Routley 1980, 835–50), or even in Medieval philosophy (see

Priest 2005, 68–81). What is undeniable, though, is that it is first and foremost through Meinong's influence that the contemporary approaches to existence as a property of objects have taken shape. Thus, it is all but mandatory to start the second part of this study with him. In fact, all the other authors discussed in the second part considered themselves to be Neo-Meinongians: Parsons, Routley, Jacqueline, Rapaport, Zalta and Priest, all read Meinong's pages on existential statements and developed their theories under their sign.

The analysis contained in the first two parts will leave us with two main competing theories: Frege's and Routley's. These two theories will be seen as the most convincing explanations of existence, i.e., respectively, as something that is and something that is not a property of objects. The problem, however, will be that the two main contenders do not provide us with any decisive argument against each other, so that the question about which theory one should ultimately choose seems to boil down to a matter of intuitions. More specifically, if someone gives priority to our intuitions about the syntactical appearance of existential statements, he will tend towards Routley's solution; if, on the other hand, someone privileges the intuition according to which statements of the form "something is x " are equivalent to statements of the form "there are (there exist) x s," he will tend toward Frege's view that the notion of existence is captured by the particular (so-called "existential") quantifier.

This stalemate will first lead me to explore the family of free logics as a possible alternative to both Fregeanism and Routley's version of Neo-Meinongianism. The conclusion of the chapter, however, will be that free logics are best considered as variations to the Fregean approach to existence: to them, existence still remains a matter of quantification. In addition, free logics do not offer us any new philosophical ammunition against Neo-Meinongianism.

Finally, in Part Three, I develop what I would like to consider a compromising solution. Relying on analysis of general existential statements in natural language, I argue that we should endorse a version of deflationism about existence. This deflationism differs from the one recently advanced by Thomasson (2013) insofar as it relies on what I call the *existence equivalence schema*, which follows the blueprint of the well-known *truth equivalence schema*. It is this schema which will allow us to say, with the Fregean philosophers, that existence is not a discriminating property of objects, and, with the Neo-Meinongian philosophers, that it is not the case that existence is a matter of quantification.

The reader may be surprised by the fact that, in Part Three, the discussion of general statements precedes the discussion of singular ones.

The reason for this is that in the last decades the hard problem of existence has often been identified with the problem of singular existential statements (see, for instance, Salmon 1998, 1). The approach defended in the last part of this study, however, goes against this trend: the hard problem of existence is first of all the problem about general statements. Once this problem has been addressed, the solution to singular statements follows almost automatically, albeit at some theoretical costs.

The fact that this study closes by arguing for a version of deflationism about existence will probably also surprise many readers—or at least it has surprised its author. But, after all, should we really be so surprised? Do we have any idea of existence? Are we sure that there is a nature of existence hiding behind our everyday use of the word “existence” and its cognates which is waiting to be discovered? Perhaps all the philosophers discussed in the present study, no matter whether they endorsed the property or the non-property view, were—in this respect—chasing a chimera.

PART ONE

THE NON-PROPERTY VIEW

CHAPTER ONE

HUME: NO ADDITION

As already addressed in the Introduction, the non-property view of existence may be traced back all the way to Antiquity. Yet Hume is the first modern philosopher who provided us with a clear formulation of this position. His approach, moreover, had a decisive impact on both Kant and Brentano, and at least indirectly, i.e. through Kant, on Frege. Accordingly, Hume deserves to come first on our reading list.

However, one should deal carefully with this matter. Hume does not explicitly argue for the view that existence is not a property. Rather, he argues for the claim that the idea of existence makes no addition to the idea of an object.

Nevertheless, given the view of property this study relies upon, the two formulations are equivalent. As we will see, by arguing that the idea of existence makes no addition to the idea of an object, Hume means that we cannot rely on existence to draw any distinction within the domain of objects. And, as addressed in the Introduction, a property is (at least) this: something which allows us to divide the domain of objects into two classes.

1.1 Attempts at Urbanizing Hume

At the beginning of the section of the *Treatise* “The Ideas of Existence and of External Existence,” Hume writes:

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. (Hume 2000, 48 [1.2.6.2])

Hume’s claim about being or existence (he seems to use these terms synonymously in this passage) is *prima facie* very puzzling: every impression and every idea—i.e., everything that can be an object of our mind in Hume’s psychology—is conceived as existent. What is puzzling

about this view is the easiness with which we may find counterexamples to it: there are many things I can think about, of which it is not true that I conceive them as existent, such as for instance, Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes, or—to borrow an example from Hume himself—the New Jerusalem. Thus, the reader is left wondering whether Hume could really mean something so blatantly false. Indeed, it is very tempting to try to *urbanize* Hume's claim, i.e. to reinterpret or reword the claim so that it loses its puzzling character.

A first attempt at urbanizing Hume is put forward by Tweyman (1992, 141). According to him, when Hume writes “there is no impression nor idea of any kind [...] that is not conceived as existent,” he does not literally mean existence, but rather, *possible* existence. In other words, what Hume is aiming at is nothing other than the well-known metaphysical principle that if something is conceivable, then it is possible. If this interpretation were granted, the quote would lose its puzzling character. Indeed, it is much less controversial to claim that everything we may think about is—at least—*possibly* existent than to claim that everything we may think about *actually does exist*. For instance, one may argue that Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes and the New Jerusalem enjoy this diminished kind of existence, at least as long as we can conceive them and, thus, they are not impossible.

This interpretation, however, does not do justice to Hume's position, as reported in the previous quote: it is by thinking about every idea and every impression that we derive “the most perfect idea and assurance of *being*.” How could we derive the most perfect idea and assurance of *being* from something that is—if not always—at least very often a mere possibility? Even if we were to subscribe to an extreme form of realism about possibilities, such as for instance David Lewis' (1986) realism about possible worlds, we would probably refrain from endorsing such a position. Hence, what Hume addresses here must be something other than the metaphysical principle that everything conceivable is possible.

Moreover, the reader may notice that Hume very explicitly endorsed the conceivability approach to (the epistemology of) modalities in a previous section of the *Treatise*: if we can think about something, then it is possible (Hume 2000, 26 [1.2.2.8]). Thus, it would be very awkward if he were to restate the same principle in such a convoluted form just a few pages later, and with no reference to his previous endorsement.

These two reasons should be sufficient to cast doubts on Tweyman's attempt to defuse the puzzling character of Hume's claim. Something more substantive than mere possible existence must be at stake here.

Cummins (1991, 63; 77) developed a second strategy to urbanize Hume. According to Cummins, we should restrict the scope of Hume's claim to impressions and *simple* ideas: Hume does not literally mean that every impression and every idea conveys the idea of existence; rather, this function is only fulfilled by impressions, no matter whether simple or complex, and ideas of a specific kind, i.e. simple ones.

The first and main motivation behind Cummins' interpretation is an application of the principle of charity: if we were to take Hume's passage at face value, he would appear to be blatantly contradicting himself—or at least Cummins takes this to be the case. The contradiction would derive from the fact that Hume previously acknowledged that some complex ideas are not copies of original impressions, as for instance in the case of the already mentioned idea of the New Jerusalem. Thus, clearly, such ideas cannot provide us with any assurance of being.

By contrast, as soon as we reinterpret the claim as targeting only impressions and simple ideas, we may rule out all the troubling counterexamples, such as the New Jerusalem. Better still, Hume's copy-principle (i.e., the principle that there is no simple idea that is not a copy of a simple impression) would help secure the fact that this kind of idea always conveys us an "assurance of being." The idea of the New Jerusalem is not a copy of any impression. But all the simple ideas that compose this complex idea are themselves derived from impressions and, thus, would carry over an assurance of being.

However, also Cummins' interpretation runs into problems. First and foremost, Hume's own examples of things that cannot but be conceived as existent clearly involve non-simple ideas, as for instance the idea of God (see the quote below, section 1.6). Could it really be the case that Hume not only forgets to specify that he is referring to simple ideas, but—over and above that—also forgets to provide the right kind of examples? This strikes me as a very uncharitable reading of Hume.

Secondly, Cummins' approach seems to suggest that, if we consider simple ideas, they are conceived as existent because of the principle that every simple idea is a copy of an impression. But this would be a very indirect and highly speculative way by which ideas are conceived as existent (notice, too, that Hume seems to allow for some exceptions to the copy-principle) (Hume 2000, 9–10 [1.1.1.10]). In addition, if Hume was really trying to convey what Cummins attributes to him, he would have formulated his view in a doubly misleading way. Not only should Hume have explicitly restricted the claim to impressions and simple ideas; but he should also have added that only impressions are immediately conceived as existent, whereas simple ideas are conceived as existent in a mediate

way, namely insofar as they are copies of simple impressions. For these reasons, I suggest that we put aside this second attempt at urbanizing Hume as well.

1.2 The Most Perfect Assurance of Being

It is often the case that a picture cannot be deciphered if we stand too close to it. So let us take a step back and consider where the controversial passage stems from. As already noted, we are at the very beginning of the section of the *Treatise* called “The Ideas of Existence and of External Existence.” Once this is taken into proper account, it seems only natural to interpret Hume as not referring to the idea of external existence at the very beginning of the section. This assumption is further confirmed by the fact that, at the end of the section, he will explicitly come to speak about (alleged) external existence. Thus, following this thread, it seems safe to assume that Hume is not talking here of the existence of what may have caused our impressions or of what may correspond to our ideas (i.e., external existence).

Once this is taken into account, the two attempts at urbanizing Hume addressed in the previous paragraph fall prey to the same mistake: both Tweyman and Cummins interpret Hume as discussing external existence. Indeed, the possible existence referred to by Tweyman can only be a possible *external* existence. Cummins, on the other hand, attributes to impressions—no matter whether simple or complex—and simple ideas priority in conveying the notion of existence because he, too, is thinking about external existence. Indeed, impressions and simple ideas convey the notion of existence because, respectively, they grant us access to externally existing things and because they are copies of something that grants us this access.²

But what, then, is the kind of existence Hume is talking about at the very beginning of the section, if not external existence? As far as I can see, the answer must be the following: Hume is addressing what to him is the more primitive notion of existence, namely the existence of impressions and ideas themselves.³

² Berto (2013) also falls prey to the same temptation of rewording Hume’s claim so that it applies to external existence. After having provided the quote of the controversial passage, he comments it as follows: “This sounds a bit confusing: the point would rather be that whatever we have an impression *of*, we have the impression or idea of an existent thing” (Berto 2013, 12).

³ Bricke (1991, 163), in his answer to Cummins, briefly considers this interpretative option, but only to discard it. The reason he offers is that such a

If we interpret Hume as putting forward a claim about impressions and ideas themselves, such a claim suddenly loses its puzzling character. On this conception, Hume would simply be stating that every time we think of an impression or an idea, this impression or idea exists within our mind, and, therefore, while we reflect upon it, the impression or idea conveys to us the idea of existence. Thus, we can no longer count on Santa Claus, Sherlock Holmes or the New Jerusalem as counterexamples: every time we think of such ideas, these ideas evidently exist within our mind and thus we can only conceive them as existent. Even better, if we follow this interpretation, we can explain why Hume—*pace* Cummins—is not at all interested in giving a priority to impressions with respect to ideas as those objects of thought that yield us the most perfect assurance of being: both are equally qualified to fulfill this function. In the present context, the principle that simple ideas are copies of simple impressions is irrelevant. Finally, we can also see how—*pace* Tweyman—the notion of possibility is not part of the picture: impressions and ideas both actually exist in our mind while we are thinking about them.

True, someone may want to argue that this is not the common way of stumbling upon the idea of existence: it is not by realizing that every impression or idea we have is existent that we form our everyday notion of existence. To the contrary, everyone would agree that it is by thinking of alleged external objects that we first form the notion of existence. However, it does not seem to be the case that Hume intended to provide us with a theory about how we develop the notion of existence. His is not a genealogy of existence. Rather, what he is telling us is where we may find the “most perfect idea and assurance of being,” which, according to his psychology, is—so to speak—in our head.

principle is not something with which an opponent of Hume could be expected to agree. Consequently, Bricke moves on to one more attempt at urbanizing Hume. To him, we should understand the claim that every idea and impression is conceived as existent as follows: “One has the experience as of something that is F if that experience is as of the existence of something that is F.” The first problem with this line of reasoning, however, is that Hume does not say that he is putting forward an uncontroversial, largely shared principle. To the contrary, the only relevant question is whether the claim made by Hume is consistent with his philosophical project—which it is. Secondly, and more crucially, it is difficult to see how Bricke’s recasting of Hume’s claim may yield us the required assurance of being: we would be left with an “as if”-assurance of being, i.e., a hypothetical one. Yet a hypothetical assurance of being is no assurance at all.

1.3 The Most Clear and Conclusive Dilemma

In the previous paragraph, I have argued that we should interpret Hume as making a claim about ideas and impressions themselves: these are always conceived as existent. And the reason for this is that, while we are thinking about them, such ideas and impressions clearly must exist. This, however, is only the beginning of Hume's discussion of existence. In fact, Hume is relying on this insight to shed light on the very meaning of the word "existence" or, in his own terminology, to shed light on what the idea of existence really consists in.

Immediately after the previous quote, Hume sets up the following dilemma:

From hence we may form a dilemma, the most clear and conclusive that can be imagin'd, *viz.* that since we never remember any idea or impression without attributing existence to it, the idea of existence must either be deriv'd from a distinct impression, conjoin'd with every perception or object of our thought, or must be the very same with the idea of the perception of the object. (Hume 2000, 48 [1.2.6.2])

Again, we should be very careful not to interpret Hume as making claims about external existence, *i.e.* about what may correspond to an impression or to an idea. Instead, he is again referring to ideas and impressions themselves. Otherwise, we would end up with the same problems that were discussed in the previous paragraph: we simply would not be able to make sense of the claim that "we never remember any idea or impression without attributing existence to it."

Once this worry is set aside, we may provide a straightforward interpretation of the dilemma. Since we attribute existence to every object of thought or perception—*i.e.*, all the impressions and ideas we have—one of the two following options must hold: either we derive from a part of the object of thought the idea of existence, *i.e.*, every object includes within itself a distinct impression of existence; or the idea of existence and the idea of the object are simply one and the same thing.

The dilemma is then easily resolved by Hume by means of the principle according to which, if an object includes within it a distinct impression *x*, we should be able to think of the same object without *x*. Thus, if the idea of existence were a distinct impression included in every object, we should be able to think of every object without this impression and, thus, we would not derive the idea of existence from it. But this cannot be the case, since it would flatly contradict the principle that everything we can think of is conceived as existent. Thus, the dilemma

leads us to conclude that the idea of existence is one and the same thing as the idea of the object.

We are finally in a position to address the famous Humean claim that existence makes no addition to the idea of any object. Indeed, this is simply another way to reformulate the conclusion of the dilemma:

To reflect on anything simply, and to reflect on it as existent, are nothing different from each other. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. (Hume 2000, 48 [1.2.6.4])

We have seen how the idea of existence cannot be subtracted from any object. But what cannot be subtracted clearly cannot be added, either.⁴

1.4 On External Existence

The time has come to address a possible concern. If Hume is referring to the existence of ideas or impressions themselves all along, he is not providing us with any general theory of existence. Instead, what he is giving us is a theory of the most primitive and certain notion of existence—of course within the framework of his psychology. But then the claim that existence makes no addition to an object may not be true in full generality, but only if we restrict its scope to the impressions or ideas we are thinking about. Most prominently, existence may add something to the objects that those impressions or ideas represent or correspond to. Yet, as we shall soon see, within Hume's theoretical framework this distinction is jeopardized.

When Hume tackles the notion of external existence at the end of the section in question, he pays tribute to one of his main influences, i.e.

⁴ It is interesting to remark that McGinn, even though only as a side note, provides a radically different interpretation of what we may label as Hume's non-addition principle. According to him, the non-addition principle is derived from the fact that existence is not a perceivable property of objects. By this he means that, no matter whether we perceive or imagine an object, this object may present us with "the same sensory appearance." For instance, "hallucinated pink rats look an awful lot like existent pink rats" (McGinn 2001, 45). Although suggestive, this approach is misleading: Hume is not saying that existence adds nothing because, for instance, we cannot find any perceivable property that distinguishes a hallucinated pink rat from an existent pink rat. As it happens, Hume is simply not interested in what may be the perceivable properties of these two rats. Instead, what he is telling us is that regardless of whether we are having an impression of a pink rat or a hallucination of a pink rat, both the impression and the hallucination exist. Once more, then, Hume is not talking of the object that may be represented by impressions and ideas, but he is talking of impressions and ideas themselves.