

Hume's Treatment of Denial in the *Treatise*

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Introduction

Thomas Reid's and Barry Stroud's discussions of David Hume's work are separated in time by approximately 200 years. Nevertheless, there is a striking similarity between concerns they raise about David Hume's theory of judgment (as presented in his *Treatise of Human Nature*). In short: both Reid and Stroud regard Hume's theory as incapable of providing an adequate account of negative judgment, or what I will term *cognitive denial*. The project of this paper is to ask whether the account of judgment offered by Hume in the *Treatise* genuinely falls to this concern. My answer is that it does not, and I hope that Hume, despite his disavowal of the *Treatise* in favor of the later *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, would forgive this paper's focus on his earlier work, especially as the project is to defend his early views from what I regard as unfair criticisms.¹

The concern is simply this: Hume's sparse resources for differentiating mental states leave him unable to properly distinguish and relate contrary beliefs, such as the belief that God exists and the belief that God does not exist. Generally speaking, there are two approaches one can pursue for making this distinction: either the beliefs in question can be treated as alike in content but differing (and conflicting) in the mental operation or activity involved, or the beliefs can be treated as alike in mental operation or activity but differing (and conflicting) in the contents they possess. In short: we can analyze a belief and its denial as *contrary activities* with a common content, or we can analyze a belief and its denial as a common operation on *contrary contents*. Reid and Stroud offer worries that Hume's commitments about the composition of mental states will leave him unable to recognize any such distinction, or, at best, that if he is able to recognize some such distinction, the account will still be unsatisfactory as a treatment of cognitive denial. I argue that Reid and Stroud both

1. In truth, my focus is even more restrictive than it might at first appear; there are some passages in the Appendix to the *Treatise* where Hume appears to retreat from the bold positions staked out in the main body of the text. My interest is in the views put forward in the main body of the *Treatise* and not Hume's later, more considered approaches.

shortchange Hume on this front, and I defend Hume's account of judgment from this concern.²

In section 1, I will present a) the framework of Hume's account of judgment (in the context of his larger project to explain all human cognition in terms of acts of conception operating with varying degrees of force and vivacity on our various sensory ideas), b) Reid's initial statement of the concern about denial, and c) Stroud's dilemma for views about denial. In section 2, I argue for the *philosophical* superiority of Content-Contrary (CC) accounts over Act-Contrary (AC) accounts, by showing that AC views do not genuinely address the fundamental challenge of cognitive denial. In this way, I hope to establish that Hume should endorse a CC account. In section 3, I consider two challenges that can be raised on the issue of whether Hume is able to (consistently) offer a CC account of denial. One comes from Stroud's discussion of Hume and concerns Hume's commitment to the principle that to think of an object simply is to think of the object as existing. The other concerns Hume's empiricist, molecularist constraints on the origin and composition of ideas. The aim of this section is to show that Hume's other commitments do not preclude him from offering a CC account of denial, or, in other words, that Hume can offer a CC account of denial. In section 4, I examine the textual evidence bearing on the question of Hume's account of cognitive denial and argue that Hume in fact endorses a CC account. I show that the textual evidence is strongly supportive of attributing to Hume some CC account or other, and I highlight the strengths and weaknesses of two principal contenders as interpretations of Hume's position. I take this to show that Hume does endorse a CC account of denial. I will conclude with some discussion of ways in which this interpretive issue bears on other points of contention/interest in Hume scholarship.

2. In line with my stated interest in the views advocated in the *Treatise*, my use of phrases like 'Hume's account of judgment' should always be taken as implicitly restricted to the views Hume puts forward in the *Treatise*, and not as an assessment of Hume's considered views on the matter.

Section 1. Hume's Straightjacket, Reid's Challenge, and Stroud's Dilemma

(a) *Hume's Straightjacket*

In order to make sense of Reid's challenge, we need to first appreciate some of the core constraints inherent to Hume's explanatory system. Hume's copy principle is a familiar example of this sort of constraint. Whereas someone like Descartes can appeal to innate ideas in explaining certain of our mental capacities, Hume insists that all of our ideas must be copied from (or traceable to) impressions of sensation or reflection. This is a point about structural constraints, and not about motivation/evidence for their positions. Simply put, a system that allows for innate ideas and acquired ideas has a richer array of explanatory resources than one that allows only for acquired ideas. That Hume has certain explanatory goals, and his system features certain structural constraints, opens the door for investigations into the structural adequacy of his system (given those goals).

A central goal of the first book of the *Treatise* is to provide an account of that portion of the mind concerned with thinking, judging, and reasoning — *i.e.*, what Hume and other early modern philosophers called "the understanding". The account takes the form of a reductive analysis of the acts of the understanding in terms of perceptions, Hume's fundamental mental entities. Hume posits two types of perceptions — impressions and ideas — differing only with respect to their force and vivacity.³ Impressions and ideas can be either simple (*i.e.*, partless) or complex (in which case they consist in some arrangement of simple ideas).⁴ Thus, for Hume to give an account of

3. Hume opens the *Treatise* by stating the set of mental particulars he is concerned with: two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS (T 1.1.1.1). He goes on to explain that the two kinds differ only in degree of attendant vivacity. In a remark offered in the Appendix, Hume appears to retreat from this view, allowing for differences in the feeling of a perception other than those of force and vivacity.
4. This doctrine is given in Hume's elaboration of the copy principle, *e.g.*, "I find [...] that I must make use of the distinction of perceptions into *simple* and

some piece of cognitive activity is for him to define or analyze it in terms of these perceptions.

It is often worthwhile to put one's interpretive cards on the table, even when one does not think that those interpretative issues play a role in the arguments being offered. To this end, I will note here that I interpret Hume's claim about the difference between impressions and ideas to commit Hume to an image-based account of ideas of sensation. There are a few places (in sections 3 and 4) where the question of whether ideas are images for Hume will make a substantive difference, and this difference will be flagged in those places by contrasting the imagistic with the linguistic or symbolic. Much of my argument turns on structural questions, however, that should be independent of these interpretive questions.

This allows us to articulate a structural constraint on Hume's system: The range of Hume's explanatory options is beholden, structurally, to a) the number of different ideas/impressions which Hume admits or allows, and b) the number of different degrees of force and vivacity which Hume admits or allows. The total number of different states of the understanding Hume can distinguish is a function of the number of pairings of perceptions and degrees of force and vivacity one can make.⁵ Since Hume also has some fairly strong constraints on the number and variety of ideas he can permit, the details of Hume's theory of the underlying entities place severe limits on the sorts of explanations he can offer.⁶

complex" (T 1.1.1.4).

5. The number of mental states can exceed the number of perception-vivacity pairings at least insofar as Hume can consider pairs, triples, etc. of states, as well as disjunctions of states or sequences of states. Lastly, Hume's associationist machinery provides some additional resources for distinguishing states of the understanding. Nevertheless, the number of different states distinguishable is a function of these two values.
6. In this case, the copy principle, Hume's commitment to treat complex ideas as arrangements of simple ideas, and the commitment to use force and vivacity as the sole method of individuating types of activity severely constrain him.

These constraints are further tightened by Hume's commitment with respect to the *way* in which aspects of ideational states can figure in explanations of the various mental states. For instance, Hume commits himself to using the ideational composition of the state only in the role of fixing/explaining the content of the state, while the other element of ideational states, attendant degree of force and vivacity, must do all of the work to distinguish among different mental states with a common content.

Hume is aware of and embraces these constraints, as can be seen in his discussion of the difference between conception and belief. Essentially, Hume accepts that the conception that Julius Caesar exists has the same content as the belief that Julius Caesar exists, and concludes (as is required by his system) that the states can differ only with respect to their attendant force and vivacity. In Hume's own words:

We may mingle, and unite, and separate, and confound our ideas in a hundred different ways; but 'till there appears some principle, which fixes one of these different situations, we have in reality no opinion: And this principle, as it plainly makes no addition to our precedent ideas, can only change the manner of our conceiving them.

[...] So that as belief does nothing but vary the manner, in which we conceive any object, it can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity. An opinion, therefore, or belief may be most accurately defin'd, A LIVELY IDEA RELATED TO OR ASSOCIATED WITH A PRESENT IMPRESSION.

T 1.3.7.5 (p. 96)⁷

7. All textual references to the *Treatise* will give the book, part, section, and paragraph number, followed by the page number from the second edition from Oxford University Press (1978), edited by P.H. Nidditch.

The relationship between the lively idea and some present impression plays no role in Reid's objection or in my defense of Hume, so, for the remainder of the paper, this aspect of the definition will be set aside.⁸ Hume's considered position is that belief is a lively species of conception, or, in other words, that states of believing a given content are a particular lively subset of states of conceiving that content.⁹

(b) Reid's Challenge

With this understanding of Hume's account of belief and the fundamental constraints that arise from the commitments of his theory of ideas, we are in a position to introduce and consider an objection to Hume's account offered by Thomas Reid in his *Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*:¹⁰

8. Setting that portion of the definition aside also makes sense given Hume's account of the conviction involved in sensation and the conviction involved in memory. When we consider all three cases, it becomes apparent that, for Hume, the conviction is a direct product of increased force and vivacity, and is not due to the relationship with an impression (except insofar as the relationship with an impression causally produces the increased vivacity in the idea).
9. It is not an aim of this paper to argue for this particular interpretation of Hume's position on belief or for the reasoning which leads him to this view. This aspect of the issue is investigated in much more detail in a chapter of my dissertation: Lewis Michael Powell (2011), "Just Imagining Things: Hume's Conception-Based Account of Cognition", University of Southern California. Published discussions of Hume which articulate Hume's commitment to the relationship between ideational content and the individuation of ideas include David Owen (2003), "Locke and Hume on Belief, Judgment and Assent", *Topoi* 22 (1): 15–28, and David Owen (1999), *Hume's Reason*, Oxford University Press. See also Louis E. Loeb (2002), *Stability and Justification in Hume's Treatise*, Oxford University Press. Though Loeb does not accept the view stated precisely this way, his proposed interpretation does not reject the idea that the number of total states will be constrained by the number of ideas and number of degrees of vivacity. Additionally, as will become apparent in the course of my discussion, Reid's objection clearly presupposes this interpretation of Hume on belief.
10. All textual references to Reid's *Inquiry* are indicated by "Inq, p. n", and page references correspond to the Edinburgh edition from Penn State University Press (2000), edited by Derek R. Brookes.

And if no philosopher had endeavored to define and explain belief, some paradoxes in philosophy, more incredible than ever were brought forth by the most abject superstition, or the most frantic enthusiasm, had never seen the light. Of this kind surely is that modern discovery of the ideal philosophy, that sensation, memory, belief, and imagination, when they have the same object, are only different degrees of strength and vivacity in the idea. Suppose the idea to be that of a future state after death; one man believes it firmly; this means no more than that he hath a strong and lively idea of it: Another neither believes nor disbelieves; that is, he has a weak and faint idea. Suppose now a third person believes firmly that there is no such thing; I am at a loss to know whether his idea be faint or lively: If it is faint, then there may be a firm belief where the idea is faint; if the idea is lively, then the belief of a future state and the belief of no future state must be one and the same.

Inq, p. 30

Though Reid uses the terms 'belief' and 'disbelief', I will refer to the states in question as "affirmation" and "denial" in my discussion.¹¹ Reid's objection can most naturally be understood as an attempt to show that the different mental states Hume must account for outnumber the different ideational states his theory allows:

1. For any content C, in Hume's system, the range of ideational states with content C are exhausted by those assigned
11. This terminological point holds for the paper generally. Though the figures I quote often use 'disbelief', I will regularize my vocabulary to 'affirming', 'denying', and 'suspending'. This helps to avoid some difficulties with an ambiguity in 'disbelief' where it can be used in some cases for denial and in other cases for suspense.

to affirming C and those assigned to suspending judgment with respect to C.

2. For any content C, the states of affirming C, denying C, and suspending judgment with respect to C are distinct states with the same content.
3. If (1) and (2), then Hume's system cannot account for denying C.
4. So, Hume's system cannot account for denying C.

Supposing that we intend to accept 3 (as I think we should), there are two ways to challenge this argument on behalf of Hume: deny premise 1, or deny premise 2.¹² Denying premise 1 involves arguing that some subset of the ideational states with content C are assigned to the state of denial. Further, it requires explaining the conflict between belief and cognitive denial in terms of some contrariety in the ranges of force and vivacity assigned to the contrary states. Premise 2 may be denied in a number of ways, but the most natural (and most relevant) is to claim that the state of denying C does *not* have C as content, despite the grammatical form of this particular description of the state. We can better understand what these options amount to in light of a discussion from Barry Stroud of Hume's account of belief.

(c) *Stroud's Dilemma*

In his discussion of Hume's account of belief, Stroud criticizes Hume for failing to treat the full range of manners of conceiving a given content, stating that "[o]ne 'manner of conceiving' an idea that Hume

12. This interpretation of the argument may seem to be at odds with Reid's discussion in *Inquiry* 6.24, in which Reid characterizes memory and expectation as involving distinct degrees of liveliness of conception, but that discussion makes it clear that Reid interprets Hume to treat memory and expectation as involving belief, and thus, as further divisions within the category of belief rather than as alternatives to it.

should have considered is denial".¹³ As we will see, his discussion nicely dovetails with our understanding of Reid's objection. In outlining his underlying concern for Hume's account, Stroud continues:

Although he speaks of disagreement, disbelief, and dissent, he never tries to say what they are, perhaps because he thinks his theory of belief, such as it is, accounts for them. But that is not so.

If assent or belief is just a matter of having a lively idea before the mind, what is dissent or denial? It would seem to be either a matter of having that idea before the mind in some different "manner", or else assenting to or believing the opposite of the original idea.

Stroud, p. 75

Stroud goes on to suggest that neither horn of the dilemma is a viable option for Hume, but all we need to observe for the time being is that the two horns of Stroud's dilemma map neatly onto the options we saw for resisting Reid's objection: we can interpret Hume as maintaining either that believing and denying involve contrary *activities* toward a common content, or that believing and disbelieving involve occurrences of a common activity toward contrary *contents*. Approaches of the first sort can be understood as Act-Contrary (AC) approaches, while those of the second sort are Content-Contrary (CC) approaches.¹⁴ Here is one way of putting the issue that can help us understand what is at stake in the choice between the two accounts: Given that,

13. Stroud, Barry, 1977, *Hume*, published by Routledge in their "Arguments of the Philosophers" series. All textual references to this work will be of the form "Stroud, p. n".

14. It is worth noting that one could posit contrariety of both activities and contents. However, a) none of Hume's objectors take him to have done so, and b) there is no reason to posit both for this particular theoretical task. Since, ultimately, my discussion could be recast simply to show the necessity of

for any content *C*, the state of denying *C* is equivalent to the state of affirming the negation of *C*, which description of the state is a better reflection of the underlying psychological facts?

To draw this out with a crude analogy: The AC account posits *both* a cognitive thumbs-up and a cognitive thumbs-down. If I believe *C* and you disagree with me, I mentally give *C* the thumbs-up, and you mentally give *C* the thumbs-down. On the CC account, there are not two basic mental activities — there is only one, a mental stamp of approval — but in addition to *C*, there is a further content, opposed to *C*, and while I stamp *C* with approval, you do not. Instead, you stamp approval on *C*'s opposite. The crucial theoretical commitment of the AC account is that the denial cannot be reduced to affirmation of the contrary; the theory requires both affirmation and denial. The crucial theoretical commitment of the CC account is that contents themselves exhibit oppositional logical relationships like inconsistency or contrariness. Those oppositional features are then inherited by acts of affirmation towards those contents.

In the next section of this paper, I will endeavor to show that, insofar as Reid and Stroud are concerned to argue against the viability of AC accounts, they are correct; such accounts are untenable in general (and especially so for Hume).

Section 2. Hume Should Endorse Contrary Contents

If we look narrowly at Reid's challenge, opting for either horn of Stroud's dilemma is adequate: Opting for the AC horn is to respond by charging Reid with undercounting the states available to Hume for a given content, while opting for the CC horn responds to Reid by charging him with overcounting the number of states needed for a given content. While it might appear that both horns of the dilemma are equally viable, it is important to understand that AC approaches are untenable as general accounts of denial. Not only does an account of denial need to tell us how denial and affirmation differ in their

contrary contents and the inadequacy of contrary activities alone, this possibility need not concern us here.

composition, but, further, it needs to explain the logical relationship between affirmations and denials of a given content. This is where AC accounts break down.

Thus, if a system can opt for only the AC horn of the dilemma, that is a philosophical limitation of that system. There are a variety of views about what interpretive force we should grant to the philosophical merits and demerits of a particular position (if any), and my aim here is not to adjudicate among those. Rather, I think it will be helpful for us to understand the philosophical dimensions of the positions under discussion, in order to understand what makes an answer to Reid's challenge promising. Additionally, as we will see, even though AC accounts are problematic in general, they are especially problematic for Hume, in light of his system and constraints. In order to see why the AC approach is uniquely ill-suited to Hume, we'll need to outline the basic issues surrounding AC approaches and note the ways in which Hume's system conflicts with attempts we might make to mitigate them.

The original form of our worry was that, for a given content *C*, there are three mental states that need to be distinguished: *affirming C*, *suspending judgment as to whether C*, and *denying C*. The AC approach to resolving the worry involves positing a distinct way of engaging with *C*, *denial*, which cannot be reduced to affirmation. In other words: this approach requires that denial and affirmation are equally fundamental/basic.¹⁵ One could then define suspension of judgment as the state of having conceived of *C* but neither affirming nor denying it. We will say that such a system has two basic acts of cognitive commitment.

The AC view generally faces a parsimony worry, while the Humean version of AC additionally faces an arbitrariness worry, but both of these are just symptoms of its more general explanatory inadequacy. I will take the parsimony and arbitrariness worries in turn, and then

15. I say "equally fundamental" rather than simply "fundamental" since Hume's account would offer a further reduction of both affirmation and denial to different species of conception. The important feature, for our purposes, is that denial is not a type of affirmation, nor is affirmation a type of denial, on the AC account.

explain how they both arise from the general explanatory inadequacy of AC approaches.

(a) *AC Approaches and Parsimony*

A defender of the AC view would likely balk at worries about parsimony. After all, merely positing two basic acts of cognitive commitment is, if anything, a more parsimonious maneuver than doubling the number of contents (*i. e.*, adding a contrary content for each positive content, as on the CC approach).¹⁶ However, the parsimony complaint against AC accounts is that they are saddled with (far) more than two basic acts of cognitive commitment.

Let's turn our attention to disjunctive beliefs:¹⁷

- v1. The belief that either God or Satan exists.
- v2. The belief that either God exists or Satan doesn't.
- v3. The belief that either God doesn't exist or Satan does.
- v4. The belief that either God or Satan doesn't exist.

It may seem like we cannot get very far without establishing the details of how disjunction is going to be treated. But we actually can make some progress, if we accept the following weak principle of compositionality for the contents of disjunctive beliefs: the content of a disjunctive belief is a function of the contents of the disjuncts.

- 16. This is a good place to note that I am not taking particular care to distinguish between contraries and contradictories. This is partially a byproduct of Hume's own lack of concern about this distinction (his definition of contrariety at T 1.1.5 seems to explicitly conflate them) and partially because contradictories are simply a special case of contraries. I do not believe that anything substantive to my arguments turns on this point.
- 17. I think this point can be raised with conjunctions, but there are workarounds available in the face of conjunctions that tend to undermine this point. Crucially, while some people are happy to treat the belief that P&Q as simultaneous belief of P and belief of Q, no such deflationary approach is available in the case of disjunction.

Now, the whole point of the AC approach was to avoid the position that the affirmation of God differed from the denial of God with respect to its content. So, the belief that God exists and the belief that God doesn't exist, for the AC theorist, have a common content. Consequently, the compositionality principle guarantees that all four of v1–v4, have the same content. But, since all of v1–v4 have a single content, the AC theorist can distinguish among them only by multiplying acts of cognitive commitment. Just as, for a content like GOD, there is a thumbs-up activity and a thumbs-down activity, for the pair <GOD,SATAN>, we will need four different activities, which we can awkwardly render as: *two-thumbs-up, first-thumb-up-second-thumb-down, first-thumb-down-second-thumb-up, and two-thumbs-down*.¹⁸ Note that for each additional disjunct we allow among contents, there will be exponential growth in the acts of cognitive commitment we countenance.

Is there another plausible way to construct disjunctive beliefs out of affirmations or denials? It is safe to say that there is not. Affirming a disjunctive content does not require affirming or denying any more basic content at all. In fact, there is *something* equivalent to affirming a disjunction, but this state would be *the denial of a conjunction of negations*. This option is not available, because, unless the AC theorist allows the activity-multiplication to go on for conjunctive contents, they will be unable to distinguish, content-wise, between the denial of a conjunction of negations and the denial of a conjunction of affirmations. Effectively, to deal with any sort of logical complexity of contents, the AC theorist is forced to posit additional mental acts. If we do not allow conjunctions of negations to be different contents from conjunctions of affirmations, there is no content we can appeal to whose denial is equivalent to the affirmation of a disjunction.¹⁹

- 18. One might think that introducing four new activities (rather than recycling the original two) is unfair to the AC theorist. The point about multiplying activities will hold either way, and it is easier to make sense of what is going on if we don't try to reuse the original activities.
- 19. One might hope to mitigate this parsimony worry by positing some sort of structure within/among these acts — in essence, regarding the new ones as having been constructed from our original two acts. This looks promising if

The initial challenge (to Hume) was that there are more basic states of cognitive commitment to account for than can be distinguished in his framework (two times as many, in fact). By positing a second basic act of cognitive commitment, the advocate of AC has doubled the available number of basic states of the understanding, and has thus produced a view that meets the demands of the initial challenge. But when we consider disjunctions (or, more generally, logically complex contents), more basic acts of cognitive commitment are needed.

So, no one embracing an AC account will simply be positing two basic acts of cognitive commitment if they are to account for logically complex beliefs. As we have seen, they will need to posit at least four (or six) such acts. The sheer increase in number of posited acts is a concern, but the real problems for the view are that a) these acts are supposed to be on a par with affirmation and denial as basic acts of cognitive commitment, but do not seem to be, and b) this is not the end of act-multiplication. Considering disjunctions with three disjuncts, or disjunctions of conjunctions, etc., suggests that the problem will recur. Limiting our attention to disjunctions alone, to treat a construction of complexity n (where n is the number of logically simple disjuncts permitted), the account will require, at minimum, 2^n basic acts of cognitive commitment.

Still, one might hope to mitigate some of these concerns.²⁰ Or one might suspect that some of this trouble is illusory, since the objec-

we think about conjunctive contents. After all, what more is there to affirming a conjunction than a conjunction of affirmations? But it is problematic with respect to disjunction, as the affirmation of $P \vee Q$ is neither affirming P , nor affirming Q , nor denying P , nor denying Q . In short: only for conjunction can we make sense of these additional acts as complexes of the original acts. With disjunction, we really need the activities to be novel. This makes the names I posited above misleadingly promising. They should really be phrased as *disjoining-the-affirmation-of-the-first-with-the-denial-of-the-second* (or something else equally cumbersome). It does matter, for the plausibility of this view, that we don't tend to think about this as a discrete mental activity taken towards a pair of contents, and instead would think of the states it purports to describe as affirming a disjunction.

20. This is not the case with F.P. Ramsey's "Facts and Propositions", appearing in *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume VII* (July

tion demonstrates only that the plethora of additional states are basic relative to affirmation and denial. One might think that someone who aims to reduce all of these states in some further manner — Hume, perhaps — could avoid the trouble.

(b) *Humean AC Approaches*

However, examining Humean versions of this approach reveals that, if anything, the trouble is worse on a Humean reduction than if one were to simply stop the story here. First, Hume's sole resource for distinguishing these basic acts of cognitive commitment as different species of conception is in terms of their degree of force and vivacity, meaning that a Humean version of this approach would posit a huge number of species of conception, all differentiated by degree of strength.²¹ Second, as Reid and Stroud point out, the nature of the differences between these species of conception does not predict or explain the nature of the differences between the acts in question. In what follows I will present the basic model of a Humean Act-Contrary account and show how it runs into trouble with both the number of theoretically significant distinctions it predicts and the predictions and explanations it offers for the relationships among the states.

As noted, to treat constructions of complexity n , the view requires us to have at least 2^n basic acts, which means, if we are offering a reduction, 2^n significant distinctions among underlying states. Initially, it appeared that Hume's states could be modeled as ordered pairs $\langle i, s \rangle$ where i is an idea and s is a degree of strength. In order to capture

1927). In that paper, Ramsey explicitly postulates a pair of contrary acts of cognitive commitment, in full recognition of the complications this brings about for contents that appear to be logically complex. In his discussion, the only nod in the direction of *dealing* with these issues indicates a plan to substitute a positive attitude towards complex sentences instead of creating additional attitudes towards the original propositions.

21. It is important to note that, while I am investigating Hume's ability to reply to this objection *without* retreating from this commitment, there is some textual evidence that by the time of the Appendix, Hume had in fact backed away from this constraint.

conjunctions of complexity four, we would require the ability to distinguish among at least 16 different degrees of vivacity. While there may be a limit to the complexity of contents we can, as a matter of psychological fact, engage with, it does not seem as though we have particular trouble entertaining contents that would be factored into five or six different disjuncts. However, such states require 32 or 64 different theoretically significant distinctions among degrees of vivacity.²² It seems clear then that invoking Hume's underlying mechanisms does not assist us in mitigating the problematic multiplication of basic cognitive acts, as Hume's view would require 32 or 64 different levels of vivacity at which the nature of the state switches in such a way as to shift whether the embodied judgment is positive or negative with respect to a given component of the content.

(c) *Humean AC and Arbitrariness*

There is an even larger problem looming, however, which can be brought out by consideration of the second objection Reid offered against Hume's account, and Stroud's discussion of a similar point. Though Reid was satisfied, in the *Inquiry*, that he had refuted Hume's account of belief, in his later *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, he seems to have modified his understanding of Hume's position and reworked his objection as one that specifically targets the Act-Contrary approach to accounting for cognitive denial:²³

22. It is important to note that the real work here is being done by the fact that the view requires such large numbers of theoretically significant thresholds for vivacity. Hume's account could posit continuum-many degrees without facing this objection (though Hume is actually limited to a finite number of degrees, given his finitist mathematical views); the problem is with having a large number of cutoffs at which something important about the state drastically changes.
23. All textual references to Reid's *Essays* are to the Edinburgh edition published by Penn State University Press (2002), edited by Derek R. Brookes and Knud Haakonssen. All page-number references will be of the form of the form "EIP, p. n". There is a variant of this objection occurring in Reid's *Inquiry*, but the version here is better-developed.

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Every proposition that may be the object of belief, has a contrary proposition that may be the object of a contrary belief. The ideas of both, according to Mr. HUME, are the same, and differ only in degrees of vivacity. That is, contraries differ only in degree; and so pleasure may be a degree of pain, and hatred a degree of love. But it is to no purpose to trace the absurdities that follow from this doctrine, for none of them can be more absurd than the doctrine itself.

EIP, p. 291–2²⁴

Unlike Reid, I think there is some purpose in tracing the absurdities that follow from this doctrine before dismissing it as hopeless. To begin, Reid's analogy to the view about hatred and love is misplaced: The proposed Act-Contrary interpretation of Hume's view does not say that denial is a degree of affirmation, but rather that denial and affirmation are both degrees of (the strength of) conception. This is more analogous to the view that love and hatred are both degrees of, for instance, concern. Whether or not that is an appealing view, it is not patently absurd.

However, there is something importantly correct about Reid's objection, and again this can be brought out by turning our attention to an illuminating discussion offered by Barry Stroud. Here is Stroud's framing of the Act-Contrary account:

On [the Act-Contrary] view we have only the one idea, that of God, or of God as existing, and we can conceive it either by assenting and thereby believing that God exists, or by denying, and there by believing that God does not exist. And both of those "attitudes" are to be distinguished

24. It is worth noting that Reid is here alleging not that Hume has the view that hate is a degree of love, but rather that Hume's view on denial is *as absurd as* the view that hate is a degree of love.

from simple conception, in which one need not have an opinion one way or another.

Stroud, p. 75

Recognizing that Hume has very few basic resources for distinguishing mental states, and specifically that the only resource available for Hume to use in distinguishing among states with the same content is the attendant degree of vivacity, Stroud explains the only position he takes to be available to Hume:

But if denial is to be a completely different “manner of conceiving” from both belief and mere conception, and if all differences among “manners of conceiving” are just differences in degrees of force and vivacity, then denial will be just a matter of having an idea before the mind with yet a third degree of force and vivacity. Will [denial] be stronger, or weaker, than belief? And how will it differ from a belief held with less than the highest degree of conviction? Will there be no difference between an atheist and a man who fairly strongly believes that God exists?

Stroud, p. 75

It will help clarify the basis for Stroud’s worry if we reframe things slightly. While the initial objection (*i. e.*, Reid’s *Inquiry* objection) was framed as a problem about the *number* of different states, there is more to the challenge than simply producing the correct number of distinctions on one’s view. The view should also produce the *right relationships* among the states. For instance, suppose we have to worry only about the acts of commitment underlying v1–v4:

v1. The belief that either God or Satan exists.

v2. The belief that either God exists or Satan doesn’t.

v3. The belief that either God doesn’t exist or Satan does.

v4. The belief that either God or Satan doesn’t exist.

The underlying states in question can all be modeled as pairs $\langle \text{GOD} \circ \text{SATAN}, s \rangle$, where ‘... \circ ...’ stands in for whatever function on basic contents takes us to a disjunctive content.²⁵ For any two distinct such states, Hume’s framework requires either that the former will be stronger than the latter, or that the latter will be stronger than the former. But consider the states underlying v2 and v3. Neither state seems to be, in general, stronger or weaker than the other.²⁶ Even if we were tempted to consider the disjunction of affirmations to be stronger than the disjunction of denials, or vice versa, the “mixed” states are clearly on a par with each other. But Hume has only one axis along which the different ideational states for a single content can vary, and, consequently, all variations are variations in strength. Ultimately, insofar as acts of denial or assent can be weak or strong, it seems like the same range of strengths seems to be available to each. The person who believes that God and Satan both exist is not in a stronger mental state, or a weaker mental state, than the person who believes that God exists and Satan does not. This problem is doubly bad if, as Hume intends, the strength of the mental state bears some relationship to the strength of our conviction when in that mental state.²⁷

25. I am here co-opting the use of all-caps notation as it occurs in contemporary philosophy of mind, where a term occurring in all-caps designates the concept of the thing designated by ordinary occurrences of the term. In our context, terms occurring in all-caps should be taken to designate ideas rather than concepts (insofar as that makes a difference).

26. This could be brought out further if we consider the states in which the component ideas are reversed. The question arises whether the state which is truth-functionally equivalent to v2 but has Satan as the first disjunct (and thus, the same order of affirmation and denial as v3) is the same act (and therefore same degree of vivacity) as v2 or as v3.

27. An interesting approach, which cannot be discussed adequately without distracting from my aims in this paper, is to attempt to amend the AC approach

(d) AC and Explanatory Inadequacy

The problems laid out thus far are symptoms of a larger failure with AC approaches: general explanatory inadequacy. AC and CC are rival approaches to explaining the relationship between affirmations and denials. AC attempts to explain this relationship in terms of conflicting activities performed with a common content. Since v_1 – v_4 are each different beliefs that one could possess, and each has a unique contradictory, AC already builds in a story about how to treat the following four judgments:

- ~ v_1 . The denial that either God or Satan exists.
- ~ v_2 . The denial that either God exists or Satan doesn't.
- ~ v_3 . The denial that either God doesn't exist or Satan does.
- ~ v_4 . The denial that either God or Satan doesn't exist.

Explanatory adequacy for AC requires that our story about affirmation and denial in the simple cases also addresses these logically complex cases. This is because AC is an account of contradictory cognitive states, and specifically, one that locates the logical relationship of contrariety or contradiction *in the activities themselves*. Note, however, that AC is not able to appeal to a small number of primitive activities, from which the logical relations in the more complex cases can be derived, but rather requires us to sort out the correct logical relations for complex cases and posit mental activities which exhibit those conflicts. The affirmation v_2 requires the state of *disjoining-the-affirmation-of-the-first-with-the-denial-of-the-second*, and then we simply need to assume that there is a conflicting activity, *denying-the-disjoining-of-the-affirmation-of-the-first-with-the-denial-of-the-second*. But these are states

by making finer-grained distinctions among degrees of strength (for instance, permitting both positive and negative vivacity, like dividing the strength .6 into +.6 and -.6). The lack of textual evidence for attributing such a view to Hume is good enough reason not to discuss it, but it is worth noting that this approach ultimately fails as well, facing similar problems when we attempt to generalize it to complex states.

being stipulated/individuated by the logical relationships they need to possess. The original account of denial is simply inapplicable to v_1 – v_4 and needs to be generalized. But we have no real account of either of those bizarre activities and thus no account of the logical conflict they are supposed to exhibit. It is one thing to posit a pair of attitudes with a primitive logical relationship between them, but if we are positing a multitude of counterintuitive such attitudes, we simply have a collection of claims about primitive logical relationships among them, rather than a genuinely productive account of those relationships. There is good reason that contemporary orthodoxy has organized around content-centered approaches to logical relationships. A small number of content connectives, with clear rules of application and combination, can secure a productive account of the logical relationships among all manner of complex cognitive states. This is where content-centered approaches achieve a clear victory over act-centered approaches.

As we have seen, the Act-Contrary approach is saddled with a variety of unwelcome and unacceptable consequences, in order just to handle disjunctions. It does not improve the view to couple it with any of the distinctly Humean commitments regarding the nature of variations in the underlying states. The problems stem from the fact that AC accounts do not genuinely explain contrariety. Consequently, anyone wishing to address cognitive denial, and in particular Hume, should address it by embracing a Content-Contrary view. This leads us to the question of whether Hume *can* endorse such contents. After all, if the only way to account for denial is with contrary contents, and Hume's other views preclude him from endorsing contrary contents, this would provide us with a strong argument against the viability of Hume's views on the makeup of the mind (incidentally, this seems to be the stance that Stroud adopts, whereas Reid, as far as I can tell, simply does not consider the possibility of Hume's taking a Content-Contrary approach). In the next section I will argue that Hume can endorse such contents.

Section 3. Hume Can Endorse Contrary Contents*(a) Stroud's Worry*

Stroud considers and rejects the possibility for Hume to embrace a CC approach. Recall that a Content-Contrary approach is one that locates the conflict between belief and denial in some relationship of contrariety among the contents of a single attitude of cognitive commitment. Stroud explains his concern in relation to Hume's deflationism about the existence predicate:

[I]t makes no sense to Hume to talk of "the opposite of the original idea". If to think of God is to think of God as existing, or as He would be if He existed, then it is not possible to have the idea of God's not existing. And therefore it is not possible to have the belief that God does not exist by having "in the assenting manner" the idea of God's non-existence.

Stroud, p. 75

Because Stroud sees this commitment as generating Hume's inability to pursue a CC approach, he diagnoses Hume's underlying mistake as the adoption of a *reistic*, rather than *predicative*, model of judgment. The easiest way to understand the contrast between these models of belief is to think about the difference between '...believes in...' locutions and '...believes that...' locutions. The former locution is typically completed by a nominal phrase, *i. e.*, the same sort of phrase that typically occupies the subject position in a sentence. The latter locution is typically completed by something that looks more like a complete sentence. The difference between reistic and predicative conceptions of belief, in a sense, is which of those two grammatical models one takes as a more perspicuous indication of the underlying mental activity. Take our familiar example of belief in God:

R: Susan believes in God.

P: Susan believes that God exists.

It is plausible to think that R and P are synonymous.²⁸ Nevertheless, sentence R superficially suggests a relationship between Susan and God, while sentence P superficially suggests a relationship between Susan and the proposition that God exists. Now, these superficial suggestions don't dictate our stance on the underlying issues in philosophy of mind (after all, one who holds that R and P are synonymous would treat the underlying mental state the same way, irrespective of the grammatical variation). But, to get our minds around reistic conceptions of belief, the contrast is useful. On a reistic approach, belief is something you do with your idea of God, while on a predicative approach, it is something you do with the (mental) proposition that God exists.

There is something to Stroud's worry: contrariety for propositions is much easier to make sense of than contrariety for objects. Take 'Snow is white' and 'Snow is not white'. An account of the predicate 'is white' (or corresponding concept or property) will determine an extension for it, something like the set of all of things falling under the predicate (or satisfying the concept or property). And then we can think of the complement of that set—the set which contains everything else—as corresponding to the predicate 'is not white'. And it is easy to see why saying something is white would then conflict with saying it is not white: we know the sets don't overlap. But, as Stroud points out, it is not so obvious that we can get our heads around what that would look like for objects, rather than sets. What sort of thing would be the opposite of the sun? There is much to be said about all of this, but I am going to temporarily table this issue, to focus on the details of Stroud's

28. Though I think this is plausible, it is worth noting that some scholars have argued that belief-in is fundamentally different from existential belief-that. See, for instance, Zoltán Gendler Szabó (2003), "Believing in Things", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (3): 584–611.

objection, rather than the details of his diagnosis.²⁹ Stroud objects that Hume cannot countenance the idea of God's not existing, because Hume is committed to the principle that *to think of an object is to think of that object as existing*.

I think Stroud is misreading the principle that Hume is committed to, in part because Hume's statement of the principle is highly misleading. Here is Hume's explicit statement of this principle:³⁰

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. That idea, when conjoin'd with the idea of any object, makes no addition to it. Whatever we conceive, we conceive to be existent. Any idea we please to form is the idea of a being; and the idea of a being is any idea we please to form.

T 1.2.6.4 (p. 66–7)

'Tis also evident, that the idea, of existence is nothing different from the idea of any object, and that when after the simple conception of any thing we wou'd conceive it as existent, we in reality make no addition to or alteration on our first idea. Thus when we affirm, that God is existent, we simply form the idea of such a being, as he is represented to us; nor is the existence, which we attribute

29. Tabling this issue makes sense for two reasons. First, whether the notion of complementary sets can actually serve to explain contrariety of predicates is a harder question than is suggested by my brief sketch. The explanation may itself rely on our understanding of contrariety, in which case it cannot really explain contrariety for us. Second, it is much more productive to have an account in front of us before asking whether it is capable of serving the explanatory role than to try and generally assess whether any such explanation is possible prior to looking at any in detail.
30. The principle is reiterated in T 1.3.7, though the principal purpose of that discussion is to highlight that imagining God to exist and believing God to exist are equivalent in their content and composition (differing only in vivacity).

to him, conceiv'd by a particular idea, which we join to the idea of his other qualities, and can again separate and distinguish from them.

T 1.3.7.2 (p. 94)

In T 1.1.6, Hume is arguing (contra Locke), that there are no separate ideas of *existence* or *being*, but rather, that every idea is the idea of a being or of a (possible) existent. This is a variation on a theme, familiar in Kant, Frege, and Russell, of denying that existence is an ordinary predicate. While those other figures approach this by positing existence as a *higher-order* predicate (that is, a predicate which applies to properties rather than individuals), Hume adopts a deflationary approach: it is not a predicate at all. This is the root of Hume's reism about judgment: he thinks that the idea of an object is, of itself, a complete thought, the thought of that object's existence. So, someone who is imagining Figment (the dragon) is *already* imaging Figment (the dragon) as existing or, equivalently, imagining that Figment (the dragon) exists. Stroud's objection maintains that, in virtue of adopting that position, Hume has automatically prevented himself from allowing for acts of *imagining that Figment doesn't exist*.

Stroud's case here depends on the assumption that any act of thought which mentions an object in its description is a thought about that object, in the sense intended by Hume in T 1.1.6. In other words: Stroud's objection depends on the assumption that to think of Figment as nonexistent is a case of *thinking of Figment*, in the sense at stake in T 1.1.6.

This general background assumption is incorrect, as we can see in the following trivial case: 'Tom is thinking about Susan's favorite sport' is the sort of claim that can be true, even if Tom has no idea of Susan at all. If Susan's favorite sport is curling, and Tom is thinking about curling, the ascription is true. Now, that case is not exactly parallel to the Figment case, but it does illustrate that we have to be careful not to

assume we can read the compositional structure of a thought directly off of arbitrary descriptions of the thought. The sense of 'thought about Figment' that is at stake in T 1.1.6 is *a thought, one of whose component ideas is the idea of Figment*.³¹

Put another way: if Tom is imagining that the sun doesn't exist, we wouldn't usually say, "Tom is imagining the sun." Imagining something as absent or nonexistent is not straightforwardly imagining that thing. And that is what Hume's principle is concerned with: the equivalence of imagining an object and imagining that object as existing.

(b) Copying and Complexity

We are left, however, with other worries (perhaps some of these are in the background of Stroud's objection, as well): If ideas, for Hume, are like mental pictures, what mental pictures could possibly be involved in imagining things as nonexistent? We might comically suggest that imagining the sun as nonexistent is to imagine the sun in a red circle with a line through it, but that is only to highlight the point that it is difficult to literally depict absences. If I draw a picture that contains no image of the moon, I have not drawn a picture of the moon's absence or a picture of the moon's nonexistence; I've simply drawn a picture that doesn't include the moon.

On a straightforward pictorial model of ideas for Hume, we can conclude, immediately, that the thought of the moon's nonexistence cannot be the result of adding other ideas to our idea of the moon. The basic pictorial model of ideas is strictly additive: combining the idea of the moon with the idea of the sun gets you an idea of the sun and the moon. More generally, complex ideas are, effectively, conjunctions of their simpler components.³²

31. In stating things this way, I believe that I am speaking correctly as a matter of interpretation, but, in doing so, I am committing myself to a simplistic understanding of how ideas compose thoughts for Hume. All composition is agglomerative, rather than functional. This point is explained in more detail in part (b) of this section.

32. This way of describing it omits the role of relations, but not in any way that impacts our discussion. Relations, in this case, will only secure us added

This is, it turns out, for the best, because Hume could not embrace a model on which there is a component idea, ABSENCE-OF(), which combines with object ideas to get the idea of those objects' being absent. Hume's commitment to the copy principle (and to the priority of particular ideas over abstract/general ideas) would be at odds with any sort of general idea of absence as an ingredient in all of our ideas of particular absences. For Hume, we'd need to start with ideas of particular absences and then construct the idea of absence in general.

(c) Two Humean Versions of the CC Approach

Any Humean version of CC will have to comport with Hume's empiricist constraint on the origins of ideas, as well as with his molecularist understanding of simple and complex ideas. But these constraints alone do not dictate the precise nature of the CC view. This is because an account featuring contents that stand in relations of contrariety can proceed in either of two ways. Option (1) is for the account to countenance a special set of intrinsically negative contents. Such contents would, for Hume, still have to be acquired through impressions and obey the other constraints of his system, but they would be additional contents above and beyond the ones we get from free recombination of simple positive impressions and ideas. Option (2) is for the account to assign a sort of dual role to certain contents. Some idea is an idea of something positive in its own right, as well as being the idea of the nonexistence of the sun. In this sub-section, I will spell out the details of what Humean versions of each of these approaches would look like, and delay adjudicating between them until after our discussion of the textual evidence for interpreting Hume on negative ideas. Crucially, both approaches wind up reifying absences, though it is worth noting that the latter option will be found, by many, to be much less mysterious in this regard.³³

claims about spatio-temporal relationships between the things in the picture.

33. Option (2) was suggested to me, in reasonable detail, by both Don Baxter and Don Garrett, during the Q&A session after a presentation of an earlier version of this paper.

It is perhaps easiest to understand the contrast between options (1) and (2) by analogy to a debate about the truth-maker thesis in metaphysics. According to the truth-maker thesis, every truth requires a truth-maker. Standardly, the truth-maker for the claim 'Fido exists' is Fido. The truth-maker for a claim is supposed to be an entity whose existence necessitates the truth of the claim. One point of contention among metaphysicians regarding the truth-maker thesis concerns the truth-makers for negative claims.³⁴ Let us grant that it is a truth that Galadriel does not exist. What entity could possibly make that claim true? One way to go is to posit, as an entity: the specific absence of Galadriel. On this picture, every way the world is has, in some sense, the same number of entities, but worlds that are intuitively less populated simply have a greater proportion of these reified, specific absences. This corresponds to option (1). The alternative, if one wishes to preserve the truth-maker thesis, is to appeal to totality facts: take some enumeration of the things in the world and add a clause saying, roughly, "and that's all". This totality is what makes true the claim that Galadriel does not exist.³⁵ This is roughly the approach undertaken on option (2).

So, option (1) posits what I will call *intrinsically negative* contents. On this approach, there are some ideas which are negative in a fundamental sense. We have already seen above that these contents cannot be taken, on Hume's view, to be the result of conjoining an abstract idea of absence with the positive idea whose contrary we are trying to construct. First, for Hume, particular ideas of absences must precede the general idea of absence. And second, such an approach would face

34. For discussion of this, among other criticisms of the truth-maker thesis, see Trenton Merricks (2007), *Truth and Ontology*, Oxford University Press. See also Jonathan Schaffer (2010), "Monism: The Priority of the Whole", *The Philosophical Review* 119 (1): 31–76, and D.M. Armstrong (2004), *Truth and Truth-makers*, Cambridge University Press.

35. Because the contours of the truth-maker debate are not our central concern here, I am omitting a bit of detail and qualification for what goes into this account, and I am definitely not aiming to address any worries one might have about totality facts.

the worry, raised by Stroud, that the negative idea would be self-contradictory (both entailing and standing contrary to the existence of the positive entity). Rather, the account would need to posit either that all ideas of absences are simple, or that any complex ideas of absences are composed out of simple ideas of (particular) absences. Either of these requires that there are *some* simple ideas of absences. Further, these ideas must originate in impressions.

There is a natural worry here: we don't have simple impressions from which to copy these ideas of absences. However, I think that this concern can be countered. Suppose someone is looking around their office for a set of keys, and someone else suggests to them that the keys might be on the desk. It would be natural to respond with "I can see that the keys aren't on the desk." This is an ordinary thing to say. And importantly, it differs from the claim that one merely does not see any keys on the desk. Similarly, I feel comfortable claiming that I see that there are no elephants in my office. Again, this goes beyond the mere claim that I do not see any elephants in my office.

The mere fact that we use claims which superficially suggest the perceptions of nonexistence or absence is, of course, not a conclusive case that we have such perceptions. But our task here is not to show that there is a view available to Hume which we would regard as true. The goal is to show that there is a coherent account available to Hume. So, if Hume takes such talk as being literally correct, he would thereby be committed to impressions of absences. Now, it is plausible that I can see the absence of Dumbo from my office only once I *already* have the idea of Dumbo. This would mean that someone who has thought of Dumbo can see more in a given room than someone who hasn't.³⁶ Now, one species of the view under discussion would have it that this impression of Dumbo-absence is itself a simple impression. This need not be a component of the view, however, as there is also a possibil-

36. It was brought to my attention that the view I advocate here is similar, in some ways, to discussions in Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* regarding Pierre's absence from a café. I make no claims to Sartre scholarship and will not investigate any such similarities in the present work.

ity of regarding the impression of the absence of Dumbo as a *complex* impression, composed from simpler impressions of absence (such as the absence of grayness, the absence of elephant-shape, etc.). Either way, the range of impressions, and thus of contents, we experience, on Option (1), includes simple negative impressions, as well as the simple positive ones with which we are familiar. These impressions and the ideas copied from them receive only cumbersome, relational names in our language, but those names do not indicate the structure of the ideas; each is more like a roadmap to the idea than a recipe for it.

Option (2) posits what I will call *relationally negative* contents. That is to say, all contents are, fundamentally, positive contents, but some of them conflict with each other. This option was first suggested to me by Don Baxter and Don Garrett. The Baxter/Garrett approach starts by identifying certain positive ideas which are, in short, too crowded to include Dumbo. As a silly example, we could consider the idea of a world that is entirely filled with chocolate pudding. Now, this idea is a positive idea of a pudding-filled world. But if we take our idea of Dumbo and compare it to this pudding-filled-world idea, there will be a sort of conflict evident between them: we can't add Dumbo to the pudding-world, because every place he might go in that world is already occupied by pudding. So, this pudding-world can, in addition to being a positive idea, be an idea that conflicts with the idea of Dumbo. It is a pair of positive ideas, such that you can't believe in both of them at once. A natural concern about this proposal is that it might seem like believing that Dumbo doesn't exist requires believing that the world is entirely full of pudding. However, there is a crucial next step to the proposal that helps us avoid that absurd result.

The idea of pudding-world is not the only idea that crowds out Dumbo. It is merely one example of an idea that crowds out Dumbo. What would be ideal is to collect together the set of all such ideas, for use as the general idea of Dumbo's absence or nonexistence. As a sort of resemblance nominalist, Hume could really give us an account of this general idea only if there were some resemblance among all of these ideas, though. And it seems like, say, the idea of a world entirely

filled with lead doesn't resemble the pudding-world in any interesting respect (let alone in some respect that would be present for every single Dumbo-excluding idea). The only feature these disparate ideas will all have in common is Dumbo-exclusion. So we could group them together only in respect of their relationship to Dumbo. But this is a good feature to have in our account, as it both explains how the idea of Dumbo would be related to the production of the idea of the non-existence of Dumbo, as well as helping us see why the idea of the absence of Dumbo differs from the idea of the absence of Pegasus. Even though pudding-world excludes both Dumbo and Pegasus, there are some Pegasus-excluding worlds that do not exclude Dumbo and vice versa. So, there is overlap in the general idea of Pegasus-absence and the general idea of Dumbo-absence, but also a clear account of how those two ideas are distinct. Some Dumbo-allowing worlds still rule out Pegasus, and some Dumbo-excluding worlds still allow Pegasus.

There are, of course, costs and benefits of these two options that I have not yet canvassed, but the basic picture of each has been laid out nicely. We now turn our attention to the textual evidence from Hume regarding contrariety and negative ideas, to try to make sense of what view we can attribute to Hume.

Section 4. Hume Does Endorse Contrary Contents

(a) *The Textual Evidence*

In the previous sections, I established that the correct resolution to the problem of cognitive denial is to embrace a CC account, and I showed that there are at least two versions of a CC account that are compatible with core features of Hume's system. In this section, I argue that Hume does endorse such an account. I start by presenting my positive textual evidence (*i.e.*, the passage from the *Treatise* in which Hume clearly commits himself to contrary contents). I then present the neutral textual evidence (*i.e.*, the other passages which involve discussion of denial or disagreement, which are compatible with either interpretation). I then discuss the "negative" textual evidence (*i.e.*, I argue

that the relative lack of discussion of denial/disagreement counts in favor of my interpretation). These considerations, especially in light of the philosophical advantages of a CC approach, support interpreting Hume as committed to some version of the CC approach.

To begin with my positive textual evidence: Hume tells us that contrariety is included among the seven types of philosophical relations among ideas.³⁷ He says:

The relation of *contrariety* may at first sight be regarded as an exception to the rule, *that no relation of any kind can subsist without some degree of resemblance*. But let us consider that no two ideas are in themselves contrary except those of existence and non-existence, which are plainly resembling, as implying both of them an idea of the object; tho the latter excludes the object from all times and places, in which it is supposed not to exist.

T 1.1.5.8 (p. 15)

This is a relatively condensed passage, in the sense that Hume tells us a fair amount about contrary ideas in the space of a few sentences. For present purposes, though, it is enough to note that, given Hume's views rejecting treating the idea of existence as a distinct idea, we cannot regard the present passage as maintaining that there is a general idea EXISTENCE which has, as its contrary, another general idea, NONEXISTENCE. Rather, it seems that Hume is positing that the only ideas standing in the relation of contrariety are those of particular existents and particular nonexistents (*i. e.*, absences). At face value, the

37. I do not mean to conflate philosophical and natural relations of ideas here, and, in fact, I mean to avoid discussion of natural relations of ideas altogether. I consider natural relations of ideas to be employed by Hume principally for explaining issues pertaining to dynamic/diachronic issues about the mind, while philosophical relations of ideas are simply one type of complex idea, employed by Hume in accounting for synchronic/static issues about the mind.

passage is a straightforward commitment to contrary contents that includes some further details of the account of contrary contents Hume has in mind. I should also note, now, that I will (a bit later in this section) address the apparent commitment to the complexity of negative ideas in this passage.

The neutral textual evidence amounts to this: Apart from this discussion of contrariety, a few paragraphs leading into his account of belief in section T 1.3.7, "Of the nature of the idea, or belief", the *Treatise* contains nothing resembling a discussion of the mechanics of denial or disagreement.³⁸ The passage leading into his account of belief reads:

Suppose a person present with me, who advances propositions to which I do not assent, *that Caesar dy'd in his bed, that silver is more fusible than lead, or mercury heavier than gold*; 'tis evident, that notwithstanding my incredulity, I clearly understand his meaning and form all the same ideas, which he forms. My imagination is endow'd with the same powers as his; nor is it possible for him to conceive any idea, which I cannot conceive; or conjoin any, which I cannot conjoin. I therefore ask, wherein consists the difference between believing and disbelieving any proposition? [...]

'Twill not be a satisfactory answer to say, that a person who does not assent to a proposition you advance; after having conceived the idea in the same manner with you; immediately conceives it in a different manner, and has different ideas of it. This answer is unsatisfactory; not because it contains any falsehood, but because it discovers not all the truth. 'Tis confest, that in all cases, wherein we dissent from any person; we conceive both sides of the question; but as we can believe only one, it evidently

38. The issue also arises, quite briefly, in the Abstract, but, as that text postdates the Appendix, I will treat it similarly to the text of the Appendix, as possibly reflecting substantive changes in Hume's views.

follows that belief must make some difference betwixt that conception to which we assent, and that from which we dissent.

T 1.3.7.3-4 (p. 95-6)

This passage is, in certain ways, equally compatible with AC or CC interpretations. In fact, in the account of disagreement that Hume regards as accurate but incomplete, he refers to both conceiving the same ideas in a “different manner” and to having “different ideas” of the proposition.³⁹ It is also important to note that Hume’s completion of the account simply involves the importance of invoking belief in the explanation of the difference; it does not involve discussing the acts of conceiving. In other words: Hume isn’t really giving his account of disagreement here; he is using disagreement as a way to illustrate the role of belief.

As to the “negative” textual evidence: What does the sparsity of Hume’s discussion of disagreement show? I maintain that it shows support for the Content-Contrary interpretation. Here’s why: In general, cognitive denial is nothing special on a CC view. If one has an account of belief, denials are just the subset of those beliefs with negative contents. There is not much to say about the negative activity (though there may be a fair amount to say about the negative contents). On the other hand, as we saw in section 2, if Hume has an Act-Contrary account in mind, there are a lot of questions to answer about how it works, what this contrary activity is, and how it relates to the original activity. If that were what Hume had in mind, it would be very natural for him to explicitly claim that there are multiple ways for the idea of God to possess belief levels of strength, and that those different ways

39. Insofar as this discussion might weigh in one direction or the other, CC appears to have the advantage: if there are two contents, C and #C, then the parties to the dispute both conceive both C and #C and differ in the manner of conceiving each. If there is only one idea, it is harder to make sense of this notion of “having different ideas”.

give rise to contrary judgments. Instead, Hume’s commitments on the nature and variety of ideational states precludes us from attributing to him anything like a decently sophisticated version of the Act-Contrary account, and failing to discuss denial would be philosophically delinquent behavior. This is both an uncharitable and an unfavorable reading of Hume’s position.

To summarize my argument: The clearest statement Hume offers on the issue expresses a commitment to ideas of nonexistence, the central tenet of a Content-Contrary approach. The main support for attributing an Act-Contrary approach to Hume is a passage that is at least as amenable to the CC reading as to the AC reading. There is not a great deal of discussion of these issues in the text, but Hume’s relative lack of discussion of the issue is substantially more appropriate if he endorses CC. When these considerations are combined with the fact, demonstrated at length in section 2, that Hume is philosophically much better off if he endorses Contrary Contents, charity would seem to require us to interpret Hume in accordance with the straightforward reading of the text: he does endorse Contrary Contents.

(b) Assessing the Interpretations

In what remains of this section, I intend to compare the CC accounts described in terms of their fit with the textual evidence and, more generally, assess their viability as interpretations of Hume. The two options on the table were to posit intrinsically negative contents or to identify some positive contents as exhibiting relational negativity.

What I take section (4a) to have established is that Hume explicitly and implicitly committed himself to the CC-style approach. Which brand of CC approach we should attribute to Hume, if any, is a more complicated question. I should begin by noting that both approaches have their own limitations and textual difficulties. Consequently, some readers may well choose to interpret this portion of the paper as indirectly arguing that neither approach is a viable interpretation of Hume. Others will look at the concerns and opt for the interpretation that strikes them as facing less serious difficulties. For myself, I will

be satisfied if I am able to adequately articulate the main difficulties for these interpretations, whether or not the matter is settled by this discussion. It is also worth flagging, at this juncture, that I seem to be an outlier with respect to my views on the viability of the intrinsically-negative-content approach.⁴⁰

I argued that the intrinsically-negative-content approach was forced to countenance simple negative contents. Before addressing what I take to be serious issues facing this account, I will respond to two worries one might have about simple negative contents.

First, an immediate worry for this approach is that Hume stated, in the definition of contrariety, that the idea of a given existent and its contrary are “plainly resembling, as implying both of them an idea of the object” while also noting that the negative idea “excludes the object from all times and places, in which it is supposed not to exist”.

It may be thought that the mere fact that the two ideas are said to resemble one another would prevent simplicity of the negative ideas. Whether this is a legitimate worry about the truth of the view is one thing, but it is evident that, in and of itself, it presents no barrier as a purported interpretation of Hume. Hume explicitly says, when laying out the case of the missing shade of blue:

I believe it will readily be allow'd, that the several distinct ideas of colors which enter by the eyes, or those of sounds, which are convey'd by the hearing, are really different from each other, tho' at the same time resembling.

T 1.1.1.10 (p. 5–6)

40. Multiple referees for this paper have advised me that the paper spends too much time on the intrinsically-negative-content proposal, and that I should simply endorse the alternative proposal. This has put me in something of a bind, as I don't want to endorse a view that I do not take to be sufficiently well-established, but I also recognize the importance of acknowledging that my position on this is highly idiosyncratic. My hope is that my critics will find this candid acknowledgement of the situation to be a somewhat satisfactory compromise.

This passage may seem to commit Hume only to the view that different color ideas resemble, but given that the context is in setting up the missing shade of blue as a possible exception to the copy principle—a purported case of (possibly) producing a simple idea without a correspondent simple impression—Hume's discussion here is relevant only insofar as the ideas of each specific shade of blue are a) simple and b) resembling. So, the proposed interpretation is not in trouble solely because Hume's negative ideas are said to resemble their positive counterparts.

Second, the passage at T 1.1.5.8 describes the ideas as both “implying [...] an idea of the object”, and one might worry that the negative idea cannot imply an idea of the object unless it is complex. However, we can note that the positive idea is also said to have this feature and presumably may be simple. So, the objection must be that the positive idea can have this feature trivially (*e.g.*, by virtue of being identical to the idea of the object), but the negative idea can have this feature only as a result of complexity. But ‘implying’ does not straightforwardly indicate the need for parthood. More than anything, this is simply an odd use of the term ‘implying’.

I can understand at least two things one might reasonably take this talk of “implying [...] an idea of the object” to mean, when taken in isolation. One is to think of ‘imply’ here as actual implication. Whether or not this would require the positive idea to be a part of the negative one, it clearly cannot be the correct interpretation of Hume's remark. This would require attributing to Hume the view that that the nonexistence of Susan B. Anthony implies the existence of Susan B. Anthony. The other option is to regard this as a claim about how possessing the idea of the nonexistence of Susan B. Anthony implies the possession of an idea of Susan B. Anthony. Since the original text involves a somewhat bizarre use of ‘imply’, I think both readings are bound to seem strained. However, given the drastic problems with the first reading, only the latter option seems to remain as a candidate interpretation. The ideas

resemble one another in that neither can be had without possession of the positive idea.⁴¹

I think those worries might seem initially compelling, but they do not turn out to threaten the account. I cannot say the same for certain relevant textual evidence. By far, the biggest barrier to this reading is provided in T 1.1.6 (“Of modes and substances”):

I wou’d fain ask those philosophers, who found so much of their reasonings on the distinction of substance and accident, and imagine we have clear ideas of each, whether the idea of *substance* be derived from impressions of sensation or reflexion? If it be convey’d to us by our senses, I ask, which of them; and after what manner? If it be perceived by the eyes, it must be a colour; if by the ears, a sound; if by the palate, a taste, and so of the other senses.

T 1.1.6.1 (p. 17)

Now, the actual context here is Hume’s deployment of the copy principle to challenge people’s claim to have a clear idea of substance. But the reasoning employed is what causes trouble for the intrinsically-negative-content interpretation: these primitive ideas of absences are not ideas of colors, sounds, tastes, etc. And so, Hume seems to be

41. For what it is worth: if we consider the closest parallel discussion in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, we find (in a footnote toward the end of section III): “For instance, contrast or contrariety [...] may, perhaps, be considered as a mixture of *Causation* and *Resemblance*. [Note from KD: Based on versions of this passage that I find online, it seems the quotation of the preceding sentence is missing some words, so I inserted [...] to indicate the omission. Also, are the italics in the original, or are they added?] Where two objects are contrary, the one destroys the other; that is, the cause of its annihilation, and the idea of the annihilation of an object, implies the idea of its former existence” (ECHU, p. 24). I don’t think this cross-textual consideration is especially strong evidence in support of my view (since the understanding of contrariety seems to have shifted in some ways), but the phrasing is remarkably similar (down to the perplexing use of ‘implies’).

committed to denying that any such ideas can be had.⁴² As indicated, I don’t have anything compelling to say in defending this approach from this worry. The very most that can be marshaled in support of some sort of phenomenological experience of absences comes from Hume’s discussion of the missing shade of blue, where Hume says, of the subject:

Let all the different shades of that colour, except that single one, be plac’d before him, descending gradually from the deepest to the lightest; ’tis plain, that he will perceive a blank, where that shade is wanting, and will be sensible, that there is a greater distance in that place betwixt the contiguous colours, than in any other.

T 1.1.1.10 (p. 6)

This passage, though suggestive of an interesting perceptual phenomenon surrounding absence, is simply not sufficient, I don’t think, to overcome the challenge provided by the 1.1.6 text. Hume’s claim that the proper objects of vision are colors is a genuine textual worry for the intrinsically-negative-content account.

The other major worry for this account is that it radically multiplies impressions. Consider all of the things that you observe not to be in the room with you right now. On this account, you have an impression of elephant-absence, an impression of peacock-absence, an impression of jumbo-jet-absence, and so on. Again, this is simply a challenge

42. Two things are worth noting here: First, though it is far beyond the scope of this paper, this consideration appears to tie into Hume’s discussion of the vacuum. In that discussion, Hume seems to deny that we can have an experience or idea of space that is unoccupied. But it is natural to read these negative ideas as being the sort of ideas that one could use to construct such an idea. I do not have space in this work to examine the details of Hume’s stance on the vacuum sufficiently to adjudicate this debate. Second, this passage seems to suggest a possible third option for the origins of negative ideas: impressions of reflexion. Though such a thought is intriguing, I cannot get my mind around what such a view would look like, and thus, I will not discuss it here.

facing the interpretation, and I have nothing special to say in defense against this worry.

The relationally negative approach does not seem to face these worries, but it does have challenges of its own. Recall that on the relationally negative approach, we simply repurpose certain “maximal” ideas as exhibiting contrariety in relation to the ideas that they exclude. In other words: a complex visual impression (an array of colored points) is going to be doing duty as the contrary to some other visual object. Neither do we have to posit additional and mysterious absence-y impressions, nor do we get a multiplication of the objects of sensory experience. The same impression of the room-as-totality stands contrary to elephants, peacocks, jumbo jets, etc.

However, this approach is difficult to reconcile with the text of 1.1.5, where contrariety is defined, and with the remarks on contrariety that occur in the discussion of the relation of cause and effect:

6. The relation of *contrariety* may at first sight be regarded as an exception to the rule, *that no relation of any kind can subsist without some degree of resemblance*. But let us consider, that no two ideas are in themselves contrary, except those of existence and nonexistence, 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.

7. All other objects, such as fire and water, heat, and cold, are only found to be contrary from experience, and from the contrariety of their *causes* or *effects*; which relation of cause and effect is a seventh philosophical relation, as well as a natural one. The resemblance implied in this relation, shall be explain'd afterwards.

T 1.1.5.8–9 (p. 15)

In a nutshell, this passage suggests that Hume takes polar contraries (*i. e.*, contradictories) to be primary, and takes other cases of contrariety to be constructed from contradictions in cause or effect. Thus, fire is contrary to water in a derivative sense, because the causes or effects of fire and water are contradictory. Thus, Hume's account begins with contradiction and aims to construct something more like the ordinary notion of mere contrariety from this contradiction relation. Note, however, that this is the exact reverse of the explanation offered by the relational negativity account. That account takes simple contrariety as the starting point: Pudding-world, recall, is just one of the totality ideas that excludes Pegasus. Then, by abstracting from the class of all Pegasus's contraries, we are able to construct an idea which is the contradictory of Pegasus.

This too, I think, is a worry without answer. I don't see any way for this more conservative content approach to really capture the account that Hume offers here. And, what's more, even if we can read (6) as being about the relation in which Pegasus stands to the abstract idea of Pegasus's nonexistence, we are left wondering about the nature of the relation that obtains between Pegasus and pudding-world, as it is nowhere to be found on the enumerated list of types of relation. And note that this, at least, is a virtue of the intrinsically-negative-content view: it straightforwardly captures Hume's claim that contrariety properly relates only ideas of objects and of the nonexistence of those objects.

Conclusion

Our project so far has been to investigate Hume's stance on the cognitive denial, as he explores it in the main body of his *Treatise of Human Nature*. Hume's explicit discussions of the issue indicate the general approach he was favoring, but particular ways of implementing that approach all seem to face philosophical or interpretive difficulties. Ultimately, I think there are three ways people might come away from this last bit of discussion: 1) some will weigh the various costs and find one or the other approach sufficiently compelling, 2) some will note the costs to either interpretation and draw the conclusion that

neither is viable, and 3) some will conclude that I have overlooked other ways of spelling out the CC approach. Those sympathetic to option (2) might well suggest that the difficulties in question are among the reasons that Hume begins to retreat from the austere (and heavily constrained) system presented in the *Treatise*, as early as the Appendix to the *Treatise* and, much later, in the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*.⁴³ I do not take myself to have conclusively demonstrated the correctness of any of these three options.

What I have clearly shown is that, to the extent that Hume had a settled view on the matter, there is no basis for attributing to him an Act-Contrary view. In a sense, it is no surprise that Hume's system struggles with the details of an account of negative contents. The challenge is one of the oldest in philosophy, going back to, for example, *The Way of Truth* by Parmenides, and figuring prominently in Plato's *Theaetetus*. To my mind, the real surprise is the degree to which particular claims made by Hume are interfering with his ability to achieve a viable account of negative contents: If Hume didn't say that all simple visual ideas had to be colors, for instance, he would be in a much better position to pursue the intrinsically-negative-content-approach. If he didn't define contrariety in the particular (and idiosyncratic) way that he does, his existing framework would appear to provide the resources to construct negative ideas.

Having a solution to this problem is important, because, given a proper account of negative contents and conjunctive contents, one can recursively define an account of all the other logical connectives. In other words: Hume is very close to having a quite powerful system of logically related contents at his disposal, and it is valuable for us to know whether or not he could achieve that system (and, if not, why not). I've argued that Hume is clear about which type of solution he

43. Two referees have indicated that I am incorrect in regarding Hume's views on this topic as having shifted substantially between the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*. While I do not have space in this work to adequately investigate and defend the claim that there was a shift in his views, I have trouble reconciling the *Enquiry* account of contrary ideas with the definition of contrariety from the *Treatise*.

advocates, and I've argued that this is the right type of solution to advocate. I've also tried to show that the solution is compatible with certain core commitments of Hume's system. While the difficulties I raise for the various implementations could easily be combined to form a sort of argument that Hume is unable to solve this problem about denial and negative contents, I genuinely think it would be premature for us to close the book on this question for Hume, as we have not yet done a thorough job of demonstrating that there is no sufficiently inventive use of Hume's resources available to evade this problem.⁴⁴

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