**Predication and Hume’s Conceivability Principle**

Hsueh Qu

**Abstract**: In this paper, I will make the case that an associative account of predication in Hume seems to allow for impossible predicative conceptions—that is, the conceiving of impossible states of affairs involving subjects instantiating properties or qualities—which violate his Conceivability Principle. The natural response is to argue that such conceptions are not clear and distinct, but substantive worries are raised about a number of attempted solutions along these lines. This poses a predicament for Hume scholars: either we must modify or abandon the Conceivability Principle, or reject an associative account of predication, or concede that Hume faces a difficulty he cannot solve.

1. **Introduction**

In this paper, I will make the case that an associative account of predication in Hume seems to allow for impossible predicative conceptions—that is, the conceiving of impossible states of affairs involving subjects instantiating properties or qualities—which violate his Conceivability Principle.[[1]](#endnote-1) Thus, on such a reading, Hume faces a unique problem with regard to the Conceivability Principle due to the peculiarities of his account of general ideas. The natural way to preclude such impossible predicative conceptions is by stipulating that they are not clear and distinct, but setting out a suitable account of clarity and distinctness for predications turns out to be a less than straightforward task, and substantive reasons are given to worry about a number of attempted solutions. This poses a predicament for Hume scholars: either we must modify or abandon the Conceivability Principle, or reject an associative account of predication, or concede that Hume faces a difficulty he cannot solve.[[2]](#endnote-2)

1. **The Conceivability Principle**

The Conceivability Principle is repeatedly endorsed, and utilised, by Hume in both the *Treatise* and the *Enquiry*.[[3]](#endnote-3) Consider the following:[[4]](#endnote-4)

…nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible. (THN 1.1.7.6)[[5]](#endnote-5)

’Tis an establish’d maxim in metaphysics, *That whatever the mind clearly conceives includes the idea of possible existence*, or in other words, *that nothing we imagine is absolutely impossible*. (THN 1.2.2.8)[[6]](#endnote-6)

…whatever we conceive is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense. (A 11)

The Conceivability Principle can be stated as follows: whatever can be clearly and distinctly conceived is metaphysically possible.[[7]](#endnote-7) The principle is vital to many of Hume’s most important arguments. He wields it in his famous argument on induction, in arguing that since a change in the course of nature is conceivable, it is possible (THN 1.3.6.5). More generally, he uses it to establish the contingency of causation, which itself is a crucial lemma in various arguments: since we can conceive of any two things standing in a causal relation to one another, anything can cause anything (A 11). He also appeals to it in arguing that abstract ideas must be particular in nature (THN 1.1.7.6).

So the Conceivability Principle is clearly important to Hume. Yet he fails to offer any substantive argument for this principle, simply endorsing it as ‘an establish’d maxim in metaphysics’ (THN 1.2.2.8). Versions thereof indeed enjoyed widespread acceptance in the early modern period, with Descartes one of its more prominent proponents.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, while for Descartes, the faculty responsible for the relevant form of conception is the intellect, for Hume, it is the imagination (THN 1.2.2.8).[[9]](#endnote-9) What is it to imagine something in Hume’s sense? Here, it is helpful to consider the contrast case, whereby his opponents purport to conceive of states of affairs that Hume deems impossible. Consider, for instance, the ancient philosophers, who ‘seek for [necessary connection] in a place [external to the mind], where 'tis impossible it can ever exist’ (THN 1.4.3.9). Clearly, for Hume, despite their claims to the contrary, the ancient philosophers are *not* successfully imagining necessary connection in objects. This is because they lack a contentful idea of such a thing. As Hume has argued, the only possible contentful idea of necessary connection is one that is internal to the mind, because our impression of necessary connection is internal, and ideas only derive their content from the impressions from which they proceed (THN 1.3.14). For Hume, the ancient philosophers fail to imagine necessary connection in objects because they lack an idea that represents such a thing. We might put the point as follows: to successfully imagine something in the sense relevant to the Conceivability Principle is to form a contentful idea of the same.

## General Ideas and Predication

Let us examine Hume’s theory of general ideas. Upon noticing ‘a resemblance among several objects’, we ‘apply the same name to all of them’ (THN 1.1.7.7). This general term brings to mind a determinate idea (henceforth exemplar), along with a custom to revive other resembling ideas that also fall under the general term in question (*ibid*.).[[10]](#endnote-10) Notably, the general idea just is a particular idea, alongside the extrinsic associative force that is custom. Following Garrett, call the suitably resembling ideas the *revival set* of the general idea.[[11]](#endnote-11) This revival set is ‘not really and in fact present to the mind, but only in power; nor do we draw them all out distinctly in the imagination, but keep ourselves in a readiness to survey any of them, as we may be prompted by a present design or necessity’ (THN 1.1.7.7)—in referring the to the revival set of a general idea, I mean those resembling ideas that are actually called to mind by the exemplar in this particular instance. Depending on the needs of our reasoning, this custom will revive this or that idea that suitably resembles the exemplar (THN 1.1.7.8). Hence Hume says:

If ideas be particular in their nature, and at the same time finite in their number, ’tis only by the custom they can become general in their representation, and contain an infinite number of other ideas under them. (THN 1.1.7.16)

Given this picture of general ideas, what account of predication emerges? Although Hume clearly makes use of predication, and even explicitly refers to it in making mention of a ‘proposition contain[ing] a predicate and a subject’ (THN 1.4.2.26), he does not detail the relevant psychological mechanisms.[[12]](#endnote-12) Nevertheless, his account of general ideas naturally suggests something like the following associative account, as explained by Garrett:

Because he holds that all belief consists in an idea’s having liveliness, it seems that conceptual judgments [i.e. judgments in which one or more things is classified as belonging to a general kind, having a general quality, or as standing in a general relation] must consist in the occurrence of a lively idea within the revival set of the appropriate occurring abstract idea elicited by a general term. (Garrett, 2015, p.75)

For instance, to form the belief that Fido is cute, we have a general exemplar of ‘cute’, say, an idea of our pet bunny Buttons, which comes with a custom to bring to mind a revival set of similarly cute things (red pandas, baby penguins, etc.). Within this revival set will occur a vivacious idea of Fido. This association between the lively idea of Fido (along with the other members of the revival set) and Buttons is what it is to form a belief that Fido is cute, according to Garrett. On the whole, this account seems to be a plausible account of Hume on predicative belief.

Let us turn to the question of what is it to form a mere conception of Fido being cute without believing it.[[13]](#endnote-13) Importantly, ‘belief… can only bestow on our ideas an additional force and vivacity’ (THN 1.3.7.5). Since the difference between a belief and a conception is just the degree of vivacity, to merely conceive of Fido as cute without believing it, we must correspondingly remove some vivacity from a lively idea. On this account of predicative belief, the relevant vivacious idea is that of Fido, and so, to form a mere predicative conception that Fido is cute would simply be for one to form an idea of the exemplar Buttons, with a non-vivacious idea of Fido occurring within the exemplar Buttons’ associated revival set.[[14]](#endnote-14),[[15]](#endnote-15) Indeed, we are at the same time conceiving of every member of this revival set as cute—recall that the revival set refers to those suitably resembling ideas that are actually drawn to the mind by the exemplar.[[16]](#endnote-16)

While I find it plausible, not everyone might be convinced by Garrett’s account of Humean predication. Although in what follows I use this reading as a particularly clear template, the crucial result generalises to any associative account of Humean predication—so long as predicative conception involves an associative relation between our ideas of the subject and predicate (whatever the details of this associative mechanism), then the door is opened for impossible predicative conceptions, as we will see.

The assumption that Hume’s account of predication should be associative in nature is hardly an unreasonable one. In general, Hume seeks to offer an explanation for the systematic patterns of the mind in terms of the principles of association (THN 1.1.4.2). Predication requires a relation between a subject and a predicate.[[17]](#endnote-17) The predicate, insofar as it involves a general term, will involve the corresponding general idea: ‘[t]he word [that is the general term] raises up an individual idea, along with a certain custom…’ (THN 1.1.7.7). Similarly, the particular term corresponds to the idea of the subject (which might be general or particular). So we have reason to think that the fundamental psychological structure of a predication will follow its linguistic structure in involving ideas of both subject and predicate. And the relevant relationship between our ideas of subject and predicate, as a general uniting principle of the mind, seems to be an associative one.[[18]](#endnote-18)

## The Problem

On the above account of predication, it seems that we can violate the Conceivability Principle by conceiving all sorts of impossible predications.[[19]](#endnote-19) We can easily conceive of a circle that is square, for instance. All this requires is to conceive of a general idea of a square, and have a circle occur within its revival set. Similarly, we can conceive of bachelors being married: our general idea of ‘married’ might bring to mind a general idea of ‘bachelor’ within its revival set. This result is not unique to Garrett’s account of predication as involving revival sets: it generalises to any associative account of predication that turns on a psychological association between our ideas of subject and predicate. There is nothing that bars any merely psychological association from occurring in principle: it is not psychologically impossible for my general idea of a square to bring to mind an idea of a circle, along with ideas of squares. In short, there seems little to prevent us from predicatively associating ideas of subjects with general ideas that they cannot possibly instantiate.[[20]](#endnote-20) According to the Conceivability Principle, this means that such impossible predications are possible, which would be a contradiction. [[21]](#endnote-21),[[22]](#endnote-22)

Importantly, unlike with the ancient philosophers examined earlier, the predicative conception of a circle that is square seems perfectly contentful, as much as that of any other predicative conception. The constituent ideas of ‘circle’ and ‘square’ are contentful enough. And the association between them, although mistaken, seems psychologically legitimate—we would not claim that a mistaken association destroys content, on pain of denying that false predications such as ‘grass is purple’ lack content altogether. So it seems that we might indeed successfully conceive of a circle that is square, on an associative account of Humean predication. Any associative principle, being merely psychological, allows for at least the possibility of deviance.

It is true that Hume thinks that we would ‘perceive any repugnance’ in using our general ideas, continuing:

Thus if instead of saying, *that in war the weaker have always recourse to negotiation*, we shou’d say, *that they have always recourse to conquest*, the custom, which we have acquir’d of attributing certain relations to ideas, still follows the words, and makes us immediately perceive the absurdity of that proposition... (THN 1.1.7.14)

Hume above argues that we would reject any nonsensical claims involving general ideas such as ‘in war the weaker have always recourse to conquest’, because our custom would quickly uncover the flagrant falsity of such claims, presumably by revealing that none of the predicatively associated ideas present in the revival set of ‘weaker in war’ involve any option of conquest. But this line of defence is no help if our custom itself is problematic, such as when it wrongly associates circles with squares; custom cannot save us from itself. Thus, nothing in Hume’s account of general ideas seems to preclude our conceiving of circles that are square and the like.

The same point can be illustrated by consideration of a similar passage:

…after the mind has produc'd an individual idea, upon which we reason, the attendant custom, reviv'd by the general or abstract term, readily suggests any other individual, if by chance we form any reasoning, that agrees not with it. Thus shou'd we mention the word, triangle, and form the idea of a particular equilateral one to correspond to it, and shou'd we afterwards assert, *that the three angles of a triangle are equal to each other*, the other individuals of a scalenum and isoceles, which we overlook'd at first, immediately crowd in upon us, and make us perceive the falshood of this proposition, tho' it be true with relation to that idea, which we had form'd. (THN 1.1.7.8)

What undermines a mistaken belief that all triangles have three equal angles are the actions of custom, which bring to mind examples that contradict this claim. But again, this is of little comfort if custom’s associative tendencies are themselves in question.

A comparison with causal association might be useful here. We know that, *a priori*, anything can cause anything (THN 1.3.15.1), precisely because we can always imagine any two things being causally related. This is because two causally associated ideas are only contingently so: it is always possible for us to imagine one associated idea without the other. Thus, the causal relation is likewise contingent: we can conceive of anything causing anything, and so it is possible that anything cause anything. Similarly for predication. It is always possible for any idea of a subject to be predicatively associated with any general idea (whatever the specifics of this predicative association): associative relations are insufficiently metaphysically robust to preclude our conceiving of circles that are square, or bachelors being married. Thus, predicative relations are similarly contingent: we can conceive of anything being predicated of anything, and so it is possible that anything be predicated of anything.

We can make the same point in a slightly different way. As Cottrell points out, the associative relation is a causal one: for an idea of X to be associated with an idea of Y is for ideas of X to tend to cause ideas of Y under certain circumstances.[[23]](#endnote-23) But, as seen above, causation is contingent: anything can cause anything. So anything can be associated with anything. If conceiving of a predication involves an association between our ideas of the subject and the predicate (whatever the nature of this associative principle), there seems little to stop us from conceiving of impossible predications.

Thus, this presents a unique problem for Hume vis-à-vis the Conceivability Principle, above and beyond the typical objections that are commonly levied at it in the contemporary literature: for instance, our seeming ability to conceive of unproven mathematical theorems as either true or false, or cases involving necessary *a posteriori* identities such as a seeming ability to conceive of water being something other than H20.[[24]](#endnote-24),[[25]](#endnote-25)

Can we circumvent this problem? One might maintain that the Conceivability Principle extends only to particulars; if so, then it would not apply to predicative conceptions. Something like this thought is suggested by Dorsch in discussing Hume’s Conceivability Principle, he says that ‘Hume takes conception always to be specific…’.[[26]](#endnote-26) Unlike Garrett, Dorsch does not explicitly discuss predication, but such a reading can be seen as ruling out general ideas from being involved in the relevant notion of conception that implies possibility.

But Hume’s own use of the principle makes clear that it extends to cases involving predication. In illustrating it, he adduces the conceivability and hence possibility of a *golden* mountain (THN 1.2.2.8): that is, a mountain that is golden. It might be objected that this case need not involve predication: Hume is not referring to an idea of a mountain that we are considering *as golden*, merely an idea of a mountain that *is in fact* golden. But other examples seem more resistant to such treatment. Perhaps most strikingly, Philo infers the possibility of matter being *inherently* *ordered* (as opposed to being ordered by God, as Cleanthes maintains) from its conceivability (DNR 2.14).[[27]](#endnote-27) One can perhaps conceive of matter being ordered without appealing to predication—just imagine some neatly arranged matter. But *inherently* ordered? There does not seem to be a plausible imagistic account of forming an idea of inherently ordered matter. We can certainly imagine some well-organised rows of matter. But this is not in itself a conception of matter being *inherently* ordered, since this order could have been externally imposed. Rather, what seems to be going on is that we are predicating of matter the general idea of ‘inherently ordered’. So Hume holds that the Conceivability Principle applies to predicative conceptions. And indeed, there seems little independent reason to preclude the Conceivability Principle from applying to predicative conception; such a move seems *ad hoc* and unjustified. In short, it seems that the notion of conception that implies possibility is one that encompasses predicative conceptions involving general ideas, *contra* Dorsch.

Another possibility is to claim that the relevant concepts are not what they seem. If my revival set of ‘square’ genuinely brings to mind a circle, then my concept is not of ‘square’, but of ‘square, and also that one circle’. So in forming such a conception, I am not conceiving of a circle as square, but as ‘square, and also that one circle’, which is clearly possible, and indeed arguably necessary. But this seems deeply problematic, for the simple reason that it seems to render misclassification impossible. According to such an interpretation, we could never make predicative mistakes, which seems a clear *reductio* of any such view. In general, Hume must allow for the possibility that revival sets include ideas that they are not meant to include, if he is to account for the possibility of predicative error.[[28]](#endnote-28) Tim’s revival set of ‘vegetable’ might bring to mind a tomato; this does not mean that that when Tim says ‘vegetable’ he means ‘vegetables and also tomatoes’. Such a picture would undermine the public nature of language that Hume himself emphasises (THN 3.3.1.16). Rather, Tim is simply *mistaken* when he classifies a tomato as a vegetable—his custom, in bringing to mind an idea of a tomato when he thinks of vegetables, is correspondingly also mistaken. Likewise, when one’s general idea of ‘square’ includes a circle in its revival set, the general idea of square, in being annexed to the term ‘square’, is really about the general idea of squares, and not a gerrymandered general idea of squares and circles. Predications about the squareness of this circle would be mistaken, of course, but conceivable—which seemingly violates the Conceivability Principle.

Yet another objection is that predication requires not only an association between the particular and the relevant general idea, but also the thought of something in its resolute particularity.[[29]](#endnote-29) For instance, it might be maintained that to predicate squareness of a circle requires not only an association between the circle and the general idea of ‘square’, but also to think of the squareness of *this* circle. Since such a conception is impossible, there is no problem for the Conceivability Principle. However, it should be noted that such an account does not straightforwardly apply to more abstract cases, such as conceiving of married bachelors—it is unclear what it would be to think of the particular ‘marriedness’ of a given bachelor. But bracket this worry for the moment.

There are two responses to this objection. First, the problem of impossible predicative conceptions can arise with respect to general ideas alone, for instance ‘circles are square’. This would, under the Humean account of predication presented in this paper, involve a general idea of ‘circle’ occurring within the revival set of ‘square’.[[30]](#endnote-30) Involving no particular object, it is unclear how the strategy mooted above would help with such a case. Second, there is no impossibility with conceiving of any given particular instantiating any given property. Consider the following:

The idea of a substance as well as that of a mode, is nothing but a collection of simple ideas, that are united by the imagination, and have a particular name assigned them, by which we are able to recal, either to ourselves or others, that collection. (THN 1.1.6.2)

For Hume, the idea of a substance is just an appropriately associated collection of simple ideas. On such a picture, it is natural to think that to conceive of any given substance possessing any given mode is simply to have the imagination unite the idea of the mode with the complex idea of the substance. Note further that for Hume, ‘no two ideas are in themselves contrary, except those of existence and non-existence’ (THN 1.1.5.8); thus, there seems little to preclude a given substance from instantiating both circularity and squareness. It thus seems unlikely that stressing the particularity of a given predication will do much to help Hume rule out impossible predicative conceptions.

The seemingly obvious objection is of course to claim that when we predicate squareness of circles and so forth, our ideas are not clear and distinct. Since the Conceivability Principle applies only to clear and distinct ideas (THN 1.1.7.6; THN 1.2.4.11), crisis is handily averted.[[31]](#endnote-31)

In the remainder of the paper, I will explore this avenue. Hume does not himself offer an account of clarity and distinctness, as (Garrett, 2015, p.48) notes, and so if we are to ratify this solution, we have to first pursue such an account on his behalf.[[32]](#endnote-32) Let us make such an attempt.

## Clarity and Distinctness as Depiction

In the secondary literature, one popular way of illuminating the concepts of clarity and distinctness in Hume is as follows: to form a clear and distinct idea of something is to form a mental image of it.[[33]](#endnote-33),[[34]](#endnote-34) Thus, to merely think of a circle as associated with a square is not to form a clear and distinct idea of a square circle. What *would* be forming a clear and distinct idea of a square circle would be to form a mental image, or depiction, of such a thing. Since we cannot form an image of a square circle, it follows that we cannot form a clear and distinct idea of it, and the Conceivability Principle is preserved. And the same is true of any impossible state of affairs.[[35]](#endnote-35)

As before, while this line seems natural with regard to concrete examples such as square circles, it becomes somewhat less straightforward with respect to even slightly more abstract examples: what is it to depict a bachelor that is unmarried (an adult male without a wedding ring?), and in what sense is it impossible to depict a bachelor that is married (e.g. by simply adding a wedding ring to that image)?[[36]](#endnote-36) But let us set this issue aside.

This reading cannot resolve our problem. I am happy to grant, for the sake of argument, that to form a clear and distinct conception of a predication will involve depiction. My claim is simply that such depiction must be accompanied by some element of association when it comes to predication. By itself, depiction is too weak to account for predication. What is it to form an image of a bat being an animal, as opposed to a bat being a mammal? What possible images will allow us to distinguish these two quite distinct predications? It seems impossible to account for this difference without appeal to some sort of association: in one case, between our (imagistic) idea of the bat and our (imagistic) general idea of ‘animal’; in the other case, between our (imagistic) idea of the bat and our (imagistic) general idea of ‘mammal’. Depiction alone is insufficient for predicative conception.

It might be maintained that, for Hume, two identical images can represent different things: for instance, a thousandth of a grain of sand, and also a ten-thousandth of a grain of sand (THN 1.2.1.3). But Hume’s point is that we can distinguish the two images because we have ‘a distinct idea of these numbers and of their different proportions’ (*ibid*.); which is to say, the two images are distinguished by being appropriately associated with different numbers and proportions. This is, of course, exactly my point: we must appeal to some associative relation to supplement the imagistic picture. Similarly with Hume’s claim that the same idea of ‘an equilateral triangle of an inch perpendicular’ being able to serve as the exemplar ‘of a figure, of a rectilineal figure, of a regular figure, of a triangle, and of an equilateral triangle’ (THN 1.1.7.9). The same idea is able to represent so many different general ideas precisely because of the differing associations (‘particular habits’) that attend to each case. Again, the same image is able to represent different things in virtue of the different associations attending each instance of representation. Thus, even if the same image of a bat is able to represent two distinct predications, some element of association is required to distinguish the different predications.

Thus, to (*per impossibile*) depict a square circle would not in itself be to predicate squareness of a circle, it would be merely to think of an impossible shape. Compare: to think of a dog that is brown is not in itself to predicate brownness of a dog. We think of the same dog with two ears, four legs, one tail, and so forth, but we do not predicate all of these qualities of the dog when we simply form an image of this dog.[[37]](#endnote-37) After all, a mere image of a dog involves no general idea, and predication must involve a general idea. We need something beyond the mere image of a dog that is brown in order to think of the dog *as brown*. For Hume, this extra element is an association with a general idea.

In short, it is perhaps the case that a sufficiently detailed depiction would ensure that our conception of the constituent ideas involved in predicative conception are clear and distinct. But this does not resolve our worry, because the problem with conceiving an impossible predication resides not with the clarity and distinctness of the ideas involved, but with the association between them.

Again, a comparison with conceiving of causal relations might be illuminating. Hume thinks that we can have clear and distinct conceptions of one thing causing another (THN 1.3.15.1). But to conceive of a causal relation clearly and distinctly cannot merely involve the depiction of a cause and effect pair.[[38]](#endnote-38) It must further require a *relation* (philosophical or natural) between our ideas of cause and effect, if we are to conceive of two causally related objects, rather than two merely juxtaposed ones, in line with the centrality of the impression of necessary connection to our experience of causality (THN 1.3.14.22). And thus clear and distinct conception is compatible with involving more than mere depiction; that predicative conception involves association does not seem to disqualify it from falling under the scope of the Conceivability Principle, if causation is anything to go by. Coupled with the fact that Hume makes no attempt to limit the scope of the Conceivability Principle beyond stipulating that it apply only to clear and distinct conceptions, it seems that short of some independent reason for thinking that the Conceivability Principle *should not* apply to predicative conceptions, there is little reason to quarantine predicative conceptions from falling under the scope of this principle.[[39]](#endnote-39)

## Clarity and Distinctness as Accuracy

How might we shore up the associative relation, such that predicative associations such as those between ‘bachelor’ and ‘married’ would rule out a conception from being clear and distinct? Presumably, this requires that the predicative association is free from confusion or error, which seems a natural way to preclude circles being conceived as square, or bachelors being conceived as married. Indeed, it is frankly unclear what else we could appeal to in order to secure the problematic associative relation.

Such an account of clarity and distinctness has been suggested in the secondary literature, typically with reference to Descartes’ account of the same:

Hume never defines clarity and distinctness himself, but he is obviously drawing on the familiar Cartesian terminology, in which to be *clear* is to be ‘present and open to the attentive mind’, and to be *distinct* is to be free from any hidden detail or confusion…’ (Holden, 2014, p.388, ft.10)

For both Descartes and Locke, moreover, the distinctness of an idea involves its insusceptibility to being confused with others. It is plausible, therefore that the restriction to clear and distinct ideas in [THN 1.1.7.6] is intended to ensure that the correct principle stated in [A 11] is not misapplied through inaccuracy, confusion, or lack of specificity about what exactly is being conceived. (Garrett, 2015, p.48)

How should we cash out this notion of ‘freedom from confusion or error’? A natural attempt, explicitly suggested by Garrett above, is to do so in terms of *accuracy*: a predicative conception that is free from confusion or error (i.e. clear and distinct) is one that is accurate.

What determines the standards for accuracy with regard to predication? An answer to this question essentially constitutes a response to what Schafer refers to as ‘The Objection from Correctness’: how can Hume’s account of cognition explain the distinction between correct and incorrect usages of a concept?[[40]](#endnote-40) There appear to be two natural candidates. One is the objective resemblances between the subject and the perceptions in the revival set: an accurate predication would involve a subject that objectively resembled the members of the revival set in the relevant respect.[[41]](#endnote-41) To illustrate, a circle would fail to objectively resemble the other shapes in the revival set of ‘square’ in respect of squareness, and thus, a conception of a circle that is square would correspondingly fail to be clear and distinct. Cottrell argues that Hume should hold the view that ‘a particular thing belongs to a term’s extension just in case it actually shares the resemblance that induced us to form our revival set for that term’.[[42]](#endnote-42) In this case, it is presumably the resemblance of squareness that induces us to apply the general term ‘square’ to the objects that we do, a resemblance that the circle in question does not share. Thus, although we in fact predicate ‘squareness’ of a circle, this circle does not belong in the extension of ‘square’, and a conception of a circle as falling under the extension of ‘square’ could not be clear and distinct.[[43]](#endnote-43)

Alternatively, we could appeal to the public nature of language.[[44]](#endnote-44) The general idea of a square is annexed to the linguistic term ‘square’, and so what is to accurately count as a square is determined by the linguistic conventions surrounding the usage of the term that the relevant linguistic community subscribes to. Given that the relevant linguistic community does not use the term to apply to circles, this would rule out a conception of a square circle from counting as clear and distinct. The importance of linguistic conventions in differentiating correct from incorrect usages of a general term has been increasingly emphasised by some recent commentators, particularly Ainslie and Schafer.[[45]](#endnote-45)

In any case, however we cut it, the upshot looks something like this: a predicative conception is clear and distinct so long as it is accurate (where accuracy is cashed out in one of the above two ways). The problem with such an account is as follows. If only accurate predications can be clear and distinct, then it follows that we can never clearly and distinctly conceive of non-actual predications. But Hume would presumably want to be able to infer that, since we can conceive of the beige wall being white, it is metaphysically possible for the wall to have been white; this seems as straightforward an application of the Conceivability Principle as can be.[[46]](#endnote-46) But according to this strategy, such an inference would not be legitimate. But surely the Conceivability Principle must do more than tell us that the actual is possible; it must also allow use to discern at least some non-actual possibilities.

The correct line seems to be to take *some* errors to compromise clarity and distinctness, while allowing other errors not to count against it. In other words, we need to distinguish between a revival set *incidentally* containing deviant members, and for such problematic members to be central to one’s predicative conception. There is something intuitive about this thought. After all, taking a circle to be square, or a bachelor to be married, seems a far more egregious error than mistakenly taking a dress to be blue. In short, accuracy *simpliciter* seems far too strict a condition for clear and distinct conception. We need to allow some, but not all, inaccurate predications to count as clear and distinct, and for this, we need another distinction in the vicinity.

## Clarity and Distinctness as Freedom from Defectiveness

Earlier, we cashed out ‘clarity and distinctness’ in terms of something like ‘freedom from confusion and error’, which we in turn cashed out in terms of accuracy. But perhaps we can explicate the notion of ‘freedom from confusion and error’ with regard to predications in terms of freedom from *defectiveness*. Defective predications are a proper subset of inaccurate ones. Structurally, this move allows us to clearly and distinctly conceive of inaccurate predications (such as imagining a beige wall as white), while ruling out clear and distinct conception of impossibilities (such as circles being square). The beige wall is deviant, but it is only incidental to the revival set. On the other hand, if one’s revival set of square contains a circle, then one’s general idea of a square is deeply problematic or defective in some way.[[47]](#endnote-47)

What is a defective predication? Intuitively, what is wrong with conceptions of circles as being square is that they do not seem to manifest a genuine understanding of the concept of ‘square’ (i.e. having a figure with four right angles and four straight sides of equal length); conversely, conceiving of a beige wall as white is compatible with understanding the meaning of ‘white’. Thus, a defective predication might intuitively be taken to be something like a predication in which the thinker reveals a lack of understanding of the essential nature of a concept.[[48]](#endnote-48)

Unfortunately, as things stand in the texts, Hume gives us little to work with in cashing out an account of defective predications. This is not to say that Hume *could* not provide an answer to this problem, only that he *does* not. What options are on the table? Ideally, we would have a unified account of inaccuracy and defectiveness with regard to predications: the two phenomena are closely related, and it would be desirable to have a philosophical framework that could explain both. Recall that there seemed two salient ways for Hume to differentiate accurate from inaccurate predications: first, by appealing to objective resemblances; second, by appealing to linguistic conventions.

Might we craft an account of defectiveness on Hume’s behalf on the basis of objective resemblances? It is apparent from the above that a defective predication cannot simply be one whereby the subject fails to objectively resemble the general idea. It is indeed the case that the circle does not objectively resemble the general idea of square, and its revival set, in respect of squareness. But it is also true that the beige wall does not objectively resemble the exemplar of white, and its revival set, in respect of whiteness. Here, objective resemblance *simpliciter* does not help distinguish these two errors, because neither of them objectively resembles the exemplar, or the relevant revival set, in the appropriate respects.

We might develop the objective resemblance account by appealing to degrees of resemblance. A mistaken predication can be distinguished from a defective one in virtue of the former involving a greater degree of resemblance in the relevant respect between the subject and the general idea (and its revival set), albeit one that still falls short of its legitimately falling under this general idea.[[49]](#endnote-49)

We can see that such an account is problematic by considering the following case. It is impossible for the colour crimson not to be red, while it is possible for, say, a crimson Ferrari not to be red. But both the colour crimson and the crimson Ferrari resemble red ideas in virtue of redness, and fail to resemble non-red ideas in respect of non-redness, to exactly the same degree. Here the relevant difference between the colour crimson and the Ferrari does not seem to be how *red* they are, but rather something unrelated to objective resemblance altogether. Thus, the difference between a defective and a mistaken predication cannot boil down to degrees of objective resemblance.

On the other hand, appealing to conventions seems a promising route, given that extra structural complexity can be straightforwardly woven into a conventional framework. It is not difficult to imagine a linguistic convention that, in addition to identifying inaccurate predications, also picks out defective ones.[[50]](#endnote-50)

Indeed, it is plausible that our patterns of linguistic behaviour already differentiate between defective predications and merely inaccurate ones. Consider our contrasting reactions in the following cases: one whereby someone incorrectly claims that ‘my feeling is unusual’ versus someone who defectively claims that ‘my feeling is green’. In the former case, we might be inclined to convince the speaker that their claim was wrong, perhaps by offering evidence (‘Actually, many people feel the same way under similar circumstances’). In the latter case, we would likely question or probe whether or not they genuinely understood the meaning of the relevant terms (e.g. ‘what do you mean by “green”?’). And similarly with those who would claim that a circle is square, or that bachelors are unmarried: our first reaction might be to probe them for clarification as to whether they understood the terms in question (‘What do you think “bachelor” means?’ ‘Do you think that coin is a square?’).

Such a difference in our patterns of behaviour might be thought to correspond to a difference in the relevant linguistic conventions. While merely inaccurate predications violate the governing conventions, they still seem to be ‘playing the same game’, so to speak. However, defective predications so thoroughly violate the fundamental linguistic conventions to the extent of prompting us to verify if the violators competently understand the relevant terms. Thus, appealing to such linguistic conventions provides a possible way to distinguish between merely inaccurate predications and defective ones—there are some base conventional rules that, when violated, indicate defectiveness, while there are other more fine-grained conventional rules that, when violated, merely indicate inaccuracy.

In short, there is very plausibly a difference in the conventions surrounding merely incorrect predications on the one hand, and defective predications on the other. One might be inclined to query what lies behind this difference in conventions. It is possible that what makes us conventionally treat defective predications differently from merely mistaken ones is that we take the former to be impossible. This might suggest an expressivist account of modality such that a possible predication is one that we can clearly and distinctly conceive: we (conventionally) consider a predication to be clear and distinct iff we take it to be possible, and thus a predication is possible iff we take it to be possible.[[51]](#endnote-51) In any case, the details of such an account go somewhat beyond the scope of my paper, but the above should suffice as a sketch.

However, a conventional account faces problems of its own. Notably, it struggles to explain our intuition that facts about impossibility do not seem relative to our linguistic community. For instance, early thinkers took themselves to be able to conceive of squaring the circle; indeed, Hobbes claimed to have accomplished this mathematical feat. Consider then the predication ‘the circle can be squared’, whereby we are predicating ‘can be squared’ of the subject ‘circle’. The relevant linguistic communities of the time would not have ruled such a predication defective, and thus such a thing could be clearly and distinctly conceived, implying its possibility at that time. However, our current linguistic communities would rule such a predication defective. In similar vein, on the conventional account, pre-Cantorian number theorists were able to clearly and distinctly conceive of predicating ‘countability’ of the Reals. Yet, intuitively, it was impossible for the Reals to be countable, and for the circle to be squared, regardless of linguistic community. It might be argued that, unintuitive as it may be to our own philosophical ears, perhaps Hume would be comfortable with possibility and impossibility being relative notions. But Hume frequently distinguishes metaphysical im/possibility from causal by speaking of *absolute* im/possibility and similar cognates thereof;[[52]](#endnote-52) such a locution might prove difficult to explain away for such a view.

## Conclusion

In sum, an associative account of Humean predication seems to impose a unique problem for his commitment to the Conceivability Principle. This paper has explored some options for qualifying the Conceivability Principle to circumvent this issue, although there have been fairly substantive worries raised regarding the options explored. In short, it seems that there is then a tension between an associative account of predication and the Conceivability Principle. If we are to avoid concluding that Hume faces a difficulty he cannot solve, this leaves us with two options. First, we might modify or abandon the Conceivability Principle on Hume’s behalf. Second, we might give up on an associative account of predication in Hume.

With regard to the first option, abandoning the Conceivability Principle is unappealing, given that Hume repeatedly leans on it at vital junctures in his philosophy, for instance in his arguments on causation and induction. Meanwhile, the prospects for suitably modifying Hume’s Conceivability Principle within the Humean framework seems dim—above, we have explored at some length various ways of suitably precisifying this principle in order to avoid the tension, to little avail. A more radical modification might yet be on the cards, although that takes us quite far afield from Hume’s system.

With regard to the second option, one might be tempted to treat the result of this paper as a straightforward reductio of an associative account of predication in Hume. And it is worth remarking that Hume does not trouble himself with providing associative underpinnings for intuitive knowledge, which he sometimes seems to suggest is a matter of immediate insight.[[53]](#endnote-53) However, giving up on such an account is not terribly appealing either. Hume prides himself on the systematicity of his account of the mind, endeavouring ‘to render all our principles as universal as possible, by tracing up our experiments to the utmost, and explaining all effects from the simplest and fewest causes’ (THN Intro 8). To offer a non-associative account of predication, one that is out of step with his account of general ideas, would certainly incur a substantial cost to this systematicity.

That said, this paper only seeks to highlight this tension between an associative account of predication and the Conceivability Principle. How best to resolve this issue is a discussion for another time.[[54]](#endnote-54)

*Department of Philosophy*

*National University of Singapore*

(Hume, 1739–1740/2007, 1748/2007, 1779/2008, 1987)

## References

Ainslie, Donald. (2010). ‘Adequate Ideas and Modest Scepticism in Hume's Metaphysics of Space.’ *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie, 92*(1), 39–67.

Ainslie, Donald. (2015). *Hume's True Scepticism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Baxter, Donald. (2008). *Hume's Difficulty: Time and Identity in the Treatise* (London and New York: Routledge).

Beebee, Helen. (2006). *Hume on Causation* (London: Routledge).

Blumson, Ben. (2015). *Resemblance and Representation: An Essay in the Philosophy of Pictures* (Open Book Publishers).

Boehm, Miren. (2013). ‘Certainty, Necessity, and Knowledge in Hume's *Treatise*.’ In Stanley Tweyman (Ed.), *David Hume: A Tercentenary Tribute*, pp. 67–84 (Ann Arbor, Michigan: Caravan Books).

Boulter, Stephen. (2011). ‘The Medieval Origins of Conceivability Arguments.’ *Metaphilosophy, 42*(5), 617-641.

Chalmers, David. (1996). *The Conscious Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Cottrell, Jonathan. (2016). ‘A Puzzle about Fictions in the *Treatise*.’ *Journal of the History of Philosophy, 54*(1), 47–73.

Cottrell, Jonathan. (2020). ‘David Hume: Imagination.’ Retrieved from https://iep.utm.edu/hume-ima/

Dorsch, Fabian. (2016). ‘Hume.’ In Amy Kind (Ed.), *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Imagination*, pp. 40–54 (Oxford: Routledge).

Dretske, Fred. (1981). *Knowledge and the Flow of Information* (Cambridge: MIT Press).

Garrett, Don. (1997). *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Garrett, Don. (2015). *Hume* (New York: Routledge).

Gendler, Tamar Szabó, & Hawthorne, John. (2002). ‘Introduction: Conceivability and Possibility.’ In Tamar Szabó Gendler & John Hawthorne (Eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility*, pp. 1–70 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Ginsborg, Hannah. (2014). *The Normativity of Nature: Essays on Kant's Critique of Judgement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Holden, Thomas. (2014). ‘Hume's Absolute Necessity.’ *Mind, 123*(490), 377–413.

Holden, Thomas. (2019). ‘Berkeley on Inconceivability and Impossibility.’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* (98:1), 107–122.

Hume, David. (1739–1740/2007). *A Treatise of Human Nature,* David Fate Norton & Mary J. Norton Eds. (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press).

Hume, David. (1748/2007). *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Peter Millican Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Hume, David. (1779/2008). *Dialogues and Natural History of Religion*, John Gaskin Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Hume, David. (1987). *Essays, Moral, Political, and Literary*, Eugene F. Miller Ed. Rev. Ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics).

Imlay, Robert. (1975). ‘Hume on Intuitive and Demonstrative Inference.’ *Hume Studies, 1*(2), 31–47.

Inukai, Yumiko. (2011). ‘Perceptions and Objects: Hume's Radical Empiricism.’ *Hume Studies, 37*(2), 189–210.

Kail, Peter. (2003). ‘Conceivability and Modality in Hume: A Lemma in an Argument in Defense of Skeptical Realism.’ *Hume Studies, 29*(1), 43–61.

Landy, David. (2007). ‘A (Sellarsian) Kantian Critique of Hume's Theory of Concepts.’ *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 88*, 445–457.

Lightner, Tycetrium. (1997). ‘Hume on Conceivability and Inconceivability.’ *Hume Studies, 23*(1), 113–132.

Locke, John. (1689/1975). *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, Peter H. Nidditch Ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

MacNabb, Donald George Cecil. (1967). ‘Hume, David.’ In Paul Edwards (Ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, pp. 4–74, (New York: Macmillan).

Millican, Peter. (2009). ‘Hume, Causal Realism, and Causal Science.’ *Mind, 118*(471), 647–712.

Millican, Peter. (2017). ‘Hume's Fork, and his Theory of Relations.’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 95*(1), 3–65.

Morris, William Edward. (2009). ‘Meaning Without Metaphysics: Another Look at Hume's "Meaning Empiricism".’ *Philosophia, 37*(3), 441–454.

Mortensen, Chris, Leishman, Steve, Quigley, Peter, & Helke, Theresa. (2013). ‘How Many Impossible Images Did Escher Produce?’ *British Journal of Aesthetics, 53*(4), 425–441.

Owen, David. (1999). *Hume's Reason* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Pap, Arthur. (1958). *Semantics and Necessary Truth* (New Haven: Yale University Press).

Powell, Lewis. (2013). ‘How to Avoid Mid-Reiding Hume's Maxim of Conceivability.’ *Philosophical Quarterly, 63*(250), 105–119.

Qu, Hsueh. (2020). ‘Type Distinctions of Reason and Hume's Separability Principle.’ *British Journal for the History of Philosophy, 28*(1), 90–111.

Qu, Hsueh. (2022). ‘Skepticism in Hume’s *Dialogues*.’ *Hume Studies* 47(1), 9–38.

Schafer, Karl. (2019). ‘The Artificial Virtues of Thought: Correctness and Cognition in Hume.’ *Philosophers' Imprint, 19*(7), 1–20.

Sorensen, Roy. (2002). ‘The Art of the Impossible.’ In Tamar Szabó Gendler & John Hawthorne (Eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility*, pp. 337–368 (Oxford: Oxford University Press).

Temple, Dennis. (1984). ‘Modal Reasoning in Hume's Billiard Ball Argument.’ *History of Philosophy Quarterly, 1*(2), 203–211.

Tidman, Paul. (1994). ‘Conceivability as a Test for Possibility. *American Philosophical Quarterly, 31*(4), 297–309.

Van Cleve, James. (1983). ‘Conceivability and the Cartesian Argument for Dualism.’ *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly, 64*(1), 35–45.

Winkler, Kenneth. (1989). *Berkeley: an Interpretation* (New York: Oxford University Press).

Wright, John. (1983). *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press).

Yablo, Stephen. (1993). ‘Is Conceivability a Guide to Possibility?’ *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research, 53*(1), 1–42.

1. Elsewhere, I have argued that Hume’s account of general ideas leads to a tension with his Separability Principle (Qu, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Indeed, (Landy, 2007) suspects that there is in fact no workable account of predication whatsoever in Hume. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Only (Wright, 1983, p.92) denies that Hume accepts this principle; for refutation see (Lightner, 1997, p.114) and (Kail, 2003, p.48), among others. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See also THN 1.2.4.11, THN 1.4.5.10, and EHU 4.2. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. In the references to Hume’s texts throughout, ‘THN’ refers to the *Treatise of Human Nature*, ‘A’ to the *Abstract of a Book Lately Published*, ‘EHU’ to the *Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ‘EPM’ to the *Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals*, EMPL to the *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, and ‘DNR’ to the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*’. Arabic numerals refer to section and paragraph numbers (EHU, EPM, and DNR); book, part, section, and paragraph numbers (THN); to paragraph numbers (A); or to page numbers in the Miller revised edition of the essays (EMPL). [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Note that ‘[t]he idea of existence… is the very same with the idea of what we conceive to be existent.’ (THN 1.2.6.4), and so the idea of possible existence is presumably not a distinct idea from the conception of the object itself. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. This principle has proven to be of significant contemporary significance, for instance in ‘zombie arguments’ against physicalism (e.g. (Chalmers, 1996)). For some influential contemporary discussion, see (Yablo, 1993) and (Tidman, 1994). An excellent collection on this issue is (Gendler & Hawthorne, 2002).

   It should be clarified that I am here concerned with the Conceivability Principle and not what may be called the Inconceivability Principle (the principle that whatever cannot be conceived is metaphysically impossible). Commentators such as (Pap, 1958, pp.80–81), (Holden, 2014), and (Dorsch, 2016) read Hume as committed to the Inconceivability Principle. For disagreement, see (Lightner, 1997) and, more recently, (Millican, 2017, pp.37–42). [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. This is not the place to enter into the historical background of conceivability arguments, but see (Boulter, 2011), who ably traces such arguments to Descartes and the Scholastics. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See (Cottrell, 2020). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Thus, in virtue of the general term, there is undeniably a linguistic element in Hume’s account of general ideas. The extent of the role that this linguistic element plays is somewhat up for grabs. Later in the paper, I will consider accounts such as (Morris, 2009), (Ainslie, 2010), (Ainslie, 2015), and (Schafer, 2019) that put linguistic elements at the forefront of Hume’s account of general ideas. While I find such accounts both sophisticated and tenable, I argue that they do not in themselves solve the problem at hand in this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. (Garrett, 1997, p.24); (Garrett, 2015, p.55). [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. This relative disinterest in predication is perhaps unsurprising in the light of his rejection of Aristotelian metaphysics, and his distaste for Port-Royal logic (which makes few appearances in his work, and is most notably criticised in a note to THN 1.3.7.5). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. This step is not strictly necessary, since the problem of the paper can be extended to belief: we can not only conceive of, but even *believe* impossible predications. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. One might worry that if one is predicating cuteness of an *existing* Fido, then one’s idea of Fido must be vivacious. But we can both conceive of something and also at the same time believe that it exists. For instance, I can imagine my friend while also believing that she exists. When we predicate cuteness of an existing Fido, the predication involves a non-vivacious idea of Fido; meanwhile, we have a separate vivacious belief that Fido exists. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Might it be that to conceive of Fido as cute, we instead merely conceive of an idea of Fido as occurring within the revival set? I think that this threatens to over-intellectualise the process of predicative conception, insofar as the average thinker’s predicative conception would presumably not involve any thoughts of revival sets at all. Moreover, this would involve an explanation of predicative conception via another form of conception, which would raise the question: what is it to conceive of Fido as occurring within the revival set? [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. It might well be that Fido is the only member of the actual revival set in this instance, of course. But where our conceiving of Fido as cute involves thinking of other cute things, we are also thinking of these other members of the revival set as cute themselves. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. THN 1.3.7.5.n20 suggests that we can form a judgment consisting of only one idea, for instance ‘God is’. Of course, such a judgment would not be *predicative*, because existence is not a predicate, as indicated in Hume’s denial of a difference between considering a thing and considering it as existing (THN 1.2.6.4). That is, not all judgments are predicative, but those that are will involve more than one idea. In line with this, (Baxter, 2008, p.55) holds that a predicative proposition is complex, involving a subject and predicate. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. It might be objected that the relation between subject and predicate might not be a natural relation, as involving association between ideas, but merely a philosophical one, which involves only a comparison of ideas (c.f. THN 1.3.14.31). For the purposes of my paper, I do not need to rule out this possibility, since philosophical relations are, by and large, easier to come by than natural ones—they only require a comparison made by the mind, rather than any associating principle. If predication required a merely philosophical relation between subject and predicate, it seems that there would equally be little to rule out impossible predicative conceptions, since any two ideas admit of comparison (THN 1.1.5.1). In this, such a line actually aids my argument—if a philosophical relation was all that was required to link subject and predicate, it would be even easier to conceive of impossible predications. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. This is not to claim that every way of conceiving of relation of ideas (or their negations) will involve predications; indeed, many will not. My point is simply that we *can* formulate and conceive of negations of relations of ideas predicatively, and this is sufficient to get the problem of this paper going. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. (Millican, 2017, p.55 n.113) similarly mentions the possibility of someone’s mistakenly including an idea of a rock under the revival set of ‘man’ in the context of discussing the Conceivability Principle, although he explicitly sets aside the issue of abstract ideas. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. (Cottrell, 2016) raises an interesting and distinct problem for Hume that likewise concerns general ideas. He points out that for Hume, the extension of a revival set is determined by the resemblances that prompt the relevant association. However, this is problematic in the case of fictions. To take a particular example, Hume takes the our application of the general idea of duration to an unchangeable object to be a fiction, but yet unchangeable objects seem to share the association-prompting resemblance that gives rise to our general idea of duration, and thus this application seems correct. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. (Powell, 2013) defends Hume from Reid’s objections to the Conceivability Principle. The objection is as follows: we can understand the meaning of ‘there is a square circle’, and so such a thing is conceivable; moreover, understanding the meaning of a necessary proposition entails understanding its opposite, and thus we can conceive of necessary falsehoods. Powell points out that this conflates issues of linguistic meaning with issues of conception. As Hume says little about the former, such considerations somewhat beg the question against him. Besides, Powell argues that there are plausible theories of meaning that Hume could adopt to circumvent Reid’s objections. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. (Cottrell, 2016, p.56). [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. See (Millican, 2017, pp.35–7) for some discussion of such mathematical cases in Hume. Note that Hume would presumably deny *a posteriori* necessities, in line with Hume’s Fork; see (Millican, 2017, pp.50–54). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. This problem seems to generalise to Berkeley’s framework, insofar as he also subscribes to the Conceivability Principle, and insofar as Hume’s account of general ideas is by and large borrowed from Berkeley (THN 1.1.7.1n). (Winkler, 1989, pp.30–34) offers substantive textual evidence for Berkeley’s subscription to the Conceivability Principle, and indeed takes Berkeley to also maintain the Inconceivability Principle: ‘conceivability and possibility coincide: a state of affairs is conceivable, he thinks, if and only if it is possible’ (p.31). (Holden 2019) denies that Berkeley subscribes to the Inconceivability Principle, but agrees that it is clear that he holds the Conceivability Principle. Textual evidence that Berkeley denies the Inconceivability Principle is adduced in (Millican, 2017, p.55 n.113). I bracket Berkeley for the purposes of my paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. (Dorsch, 2016, p.48). [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Philo, who I have argued in my Qu (2022) acts as Hume’s spokesperson in the *Dialogues*, makes this inference, and meets with little resistance on this front from either Cleanthes or Demea. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Later, we will examine some more nuanced accounts of how Hume might rule out problematic predications while retaining the possibility of misclassification. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Thanks to Donald Ainslie for pressing me on this. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. (Garrett, 2015, p.75). [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. (Kail, 2003) has argued that the Conceivability Principle also requires that the ideas in question, besides being clear and distinct, must also be ‘adequate’ (THN 1.2.2.1). Kail’s account of adequacy is as follows: representations are adequate if they ‘reveal enough information about such objects to move from conceivability to metaphysical possibility’ (p.54). But this seems to render the Conceivability Principle trivial: we are licensed to move from the conceivability to metaphysical possibility with respect to objects, if our ideas of them are such that they license such a move.

    Millican argues against Kail on ‘adequacy’ being a Humean requirement for clarity and distinctness, pointing out that only one passage concerning conceivability and possibility mentions adequacy, and even here in THN 1.2.2.1, adequacy is stated as a condition of moving from *inconceivability* *to impossibility*, which does not concern the Conceivability Principle, but the Inconceivability Principle (Millican, 2009, p.677); (Millican, 2017, p.40). Meanwhile, (Lightner, 1997, p.121) reads ‘adequate’ as just another way of saying ‘clear and distinct’. I set aside ‘adequacy’ as a prerequisite for the Conceivability Principle for the purposes of this paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. For instance, (Owen, 1999, pp.109–110) maintains that we only *appear* to distinctly conceive of complex mathematical propositions that are in fact false, without genuinely conceiving of them in a distinct manner. But this is not to offer an account of clear and distinct conception so much as to presuppose one. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. (Dorsch, 2016, p.48), in discussing Hume’s Conceivability Principle, claims that ‘Hume takes conception always to be specific and imagistic’. (MacNabb, 1967, p.79) similarly takes conception to involve forming a mental image. Other defenders include (Inukai, 2011, p.208, ft.19) and (Imlay, 1975, p.39–40). (Millican, 2017, p.35) takes Hume to be an imagist, and notes that the appeal of the Conceivability Principle ‘is obvious enough’ on such a view, although he goes on to argue that the principle can be maintained even when depiction is out of the question. That Humean conception requires depiction is denied in (Temple, 1984, p.206). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. This is aligned with Locke’s account of clarity and distinctness. For Locke, simple ideas are clear when they ‘are such as the Objects themselves, from whence they were taken, did or might, in a well-ordered Sensation or Perception, present them” (*Essay* 2.24.2)—this suggests an imagistic notion of clarity, whereby to clearly conceive (a simple) idea is to conceive it as it might be presented to our senses. Meanwhile, distinct ideas are such that ‘the Mind perceives a difference from all other’ (*Essay* 2.24.4)—that is, we can conceive of the idea in itself, apart from any other. Putting them together, we can be said to have a clear and distinct idea of X if we can form a sensory (used here to include both inner and outer sense) depiction of X on its own. References to Locke are to *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Nidditch, Oxford University Press (1975). Arabic numerals refer to book, chapter, and paragraph numbers. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. This claim is not as uncontroversial as it might seem, as there has been some debate regarding whether impossibilities can be depicted. For some discussion, see (Sorensen, 2002), (Mortensen, Leishman, Quigley, & Helke, 2013), and (Blumson, 2015, pp.172–177). [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. (Van Cleve, 1983, p.36) raises essentially this worry, and puts the general point well: ‘What Hume himself meant by ‘conceivable’ was *imaginable*. Now if by ‘imagining’ a state of affairs we mean forming an accurate mental picture of it, it might be thought that no impossible state of affairs is imaginable. But I do not see how to guarantee this result short of defining an accurate picture as one that shares all traits of the thing pictured, in which case next to nothing is imaginable’. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. See also (Landy, 2007, p.448). [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. (Van Cleve, 1983, p.36). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. This similarity between the conceptions of causal relations and those of predications is in line with Hume’s (somewhat puzzling) claim that metaphysical necessity and causal necessity are of a piece:

    Thus as the necessity, which makes two times two equal to four, or three angles of a triangle equal to two right ones, lies only in the act of the understanding, by which we consider and compare these ideas; in like manner the necessity or power, which unites causes and effects, lies in the determination of the mind to pass from the one to the other. (THN 1.3.14.23) [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. (Schafer, 2019). Schafer takes this to be something like a specific version of Ginsborg’s worry that Hume’s associationistic framework fails to account for the normative dimensions of thought and language (Ginsborg, 2014, pp.159–160). [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. This would presuppose a realist theory of resemblance in Hume. I am inclined to think that resemblance reduces to associative tendencies for Hume, which would preclude such a strategy, but I set this inclination aside for the purposes of the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. (Cottrell, 2016, p.58). [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Such an account shares some affinities with (Dretske, 1981), which maintains that there is a learning period that determines semantic content, with the content being fixed after the learning period expires, thus allowing for the possibility of misrepresentation on a causal theory of mental content. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. Accounts founded on linguistic conventions are perhaps natural extensions of expressivist theories of modality such as (Holden, 2014). In this regard, we might compare it with Hume’s moral theory, which makes use of the public nature of moral language to standardise our ideas and discourse on moral issues (EPM 5.42), which allows for his sentimentalist ethics to be, if not objective, then at least inter-subjective. [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. See (Ainslie, 2010, p.50), (Ainslie, 2015, p.65), and (Schafer, 2019). Less explicitly, (Garrett, 2015, p.56) differentiates between actual and idealised revival sets, with the latter being partly determined by ‘exposure to the classificatory tendencies of others who employ the same term’; (Morris, 2009, p.449) likewise stresses the ‘social character of determining meaningfulness’ for Hume. [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. Here I am setting aside a complication as a result of Hume’s metaphysics. Hume in the *Treatise* thinks that strictly speaking, identity is incompatible with intrinsic change (THN 1.4.6.6), and so it might be maintained that it is in fact metaphysically impossible for *this* wall to have been white. We can easily modify the example to avoid this complication by making the subject of predication a general idea. A general idea is such that its extension can change (for instance, by new members coming into existence, or old members disappearing or no longer satisfying the predicate). Presumably Hume would want to be able to infer from the fact that since we can imagine Japanese Spitzes being purple, such a thing is possible. But this would involve inaccurately predicating ‘purple’ of the general idea ‘Japanese Spitz’. Or, we could adduce a case involving the predication of extrinsic qualities. For instance, Hume notes that a change in spatial relations does not change either the objects or the ideas of them (THN 1.3.1.1), as noted in (Boehm, 2013, p.70). Hume would presumably like to be able to infer that since we can imagine Smith being in France, such a thing is metaphysically possible. But this would involve inaccurately predicating ‘is in France’ of Smith. Either way, the problem remains. [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. This distinction between defective and inaccurate predications is in a way a mirror image of one raised in (Cottrell, 2016, pp.63–64) between the ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ extension of a revival set. Cottrell draws a distinction between correct and incorrect applications of a general term to objects that *in fact* share the relevant association-prompting resemblance. To speak in terms of Cottrell’s framework here, my distinction between defective and inaccurate predications distinguishes between incorrect and incoherent applications of a general term to objects that *do not* share the relevant association-prompting resemblance. [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. Earlier, we considered how Hume might reply to what Schafer termed the ‘The Objection from Correctness’, and we saw a number of plausible Humean answers: either appealing to objective resemblances, or to linguistic conventions. Here we see another problem, which we might call ‘The Objection from Understanding’: can Hume’s imagistic and associationistic framework of general ideas account for what it is to *understand* a concept? Having an imagistic idea that brings to mind other similar ideas in itself seems to leave out something crucial about concept-possession: that is, the idea of genuinely understanding *what it is* to be a square, as opposed to what a square *looks like*. To get into this issue would take us too far afield, however, and I reluctantly bracket the issue for another time. [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. Importantly, note that appealing to degrees of objective resemblance *simpliciter* (without specifying the particular respect of resemblance) would not suffice for an account of defectiveness. For instance, compare the following cases of mistaken predication: a defective case where I judge that ‘bachelors are married men’, and a mere misapplication where I judge that ‘that wall is white’. My exemplar for ‘bachelor’ (Jim) might resemble my exemplar for ‘married man’ (his twin brother John) far more than my idea of the wall resembles my exemplar of ‘white’ (a Japanese Spitz). [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. (Schafer, 2019) spells out a virtue-theoretic account of the conventional nature of our concepts in terms of the virtue of ‘linguistic propriety’. He conceives it primarily as allowing for the distinction between correct and incorrect predications, but the intuitive notion of linguistic propriety might be naturally thought to apply here: defective predications seem to violate linguistic propriety in a way that merely inaccurate (but non-defective) ones do not. [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. (Holden, 2014) defends an expressivist account of modality in Hume; similarly, (Boehm, 2013, p. 77) takes the ‘conceivability test’ (the impossibility of conceiving the lack of a certain relation between two ideas) to be constitutive of intuitive or demonstrative necessity, rather than a mere test of it (as opposed to e.g. (Beebee, 2006, p.30)). See (Millican, 2017, pp. 41–2) for criticism of Holden’s expressivist account. [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. See for instance THN 1.1.1.10, THN 1.2.2.8, THN 1.2.3.14, THN 1.3.6.1, THN 1.3.6.5, THN 1.3.9.10, and THN 1.3.14.13. [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. See for instance THN 1.3.1.2, which remarks that three of the constant relations (of resemblance, contrariety, and degrees in quality) are ‘discoverable at first sight’, and ‘will at first strike the eye, or rather the mind’. Thanks to an anonymous referee for helpful discussion on this point. [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. For very helpful comments on this paper, I am grateful to Don Garrett, Jonathan Cottrell, Karl Schafer, Donald Ainslie, Peter Millican, and Graham Clay, as well as audiences at UC Irvine and the 2018 Hume Conference at the University of Nevada, and a reading group at NUS. I am also grateful to the editor and two anonymous referees for this journal for very useful comments, which improved the paper. [↑](#endnote-ref-54)