

Hume's Conceivability Principle: A Preliminary Consideration

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Hume's Conceivability Principle is one of the main pillars of his philosophical system. According to Hume, "Whatever we conceive is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense" (T Abstract 11)¹⁾. Compared with other well-known principles of his metaphysics, the importance of the Conceivability Principle does not seem to be thoroughly explored. In this paper, I will first outline the principle, and then clarify the fundamental role of the principle by placing it in the context of modern philosophy, and finally offer my solution to an interpretative problem that is disputed among Hume scholars. In the process of delineating these circumstances surrounding the principle, the fundamental character of Hume's empiricism and scepticism will be clarified. This paper tries to provide a preliminary consideration for resolving intricate problems relating to the Conceivability Principle.

1. Hume's Four Basic Principles

Hume refers to the Conceivability Principle in several famous places. Let us briefly review the main topics where Hume relies on the principle to defend his theories. Here are some of them²⁾.

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- 1) David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (eds.), Oxford University Press, 2000, cited as "T", followed by book, part, section, and paragraph number.
 - 2) D. Tyceerium Lightner, "Hume on Conceivability and Inconceivability", *Hume Studies* 23.1, 1997, pp. 114-115. According to Lightner, Hume touched upon the concept of conceivability 17 times in the *Treatise* and 3 times in *An Abstract of a Book Lately Published*. Tyceerium (1997, p. 115), Bo Chen and Jingxian Liu, "Hume's Conceivability Argument Reconsidered", *Axiomathes*, 2019, 29: 544. <https://davidhume.org/>. Although Hume relies on the Conceivability Principle,

1. In the section on abstract ideas, Hume states,

“If this therefore be absurd in *fact and reality*, it must also be absurd *in idea*; since nothing of which we can form a clear and distinct idea is absurd and impossible” (T 1.1.7.6).
2. In the section where he discusses space and time, he states,

“’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*. We can form the idea of a golden mountain, and from thence conclude that such a mountain may actually exist. We can form no idea of a mountain without a valley, and therefore regard it as impossible” (T 1.2.2.8).
3. In the section of the ideas of being and external beings, he states,

“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).
4. In the discussion of the uniformity of nature, he states,

“We can at least conceive a change in the course of nature; which sufficiently proves, that such a change is not absolutely impossible. To form a clear idea of any thing, is an undeniable argument for its possibility, and is alone a refutation of any pretended demonstration against it” (T 1.3.6.5).
5. In the discussion of the external objects, he states,

“If they appear not to have any particular place, they may possibly exist in the same manner; since whatever we conceive is possible” (T 1.4.5.10).
6. In his criticism of the substantiality of the mind, he states,

“Our perceptions are all really different, and separable, and

he does not meticulously mention it each time.

distinguishable from each other, and from every thing else, which we can imagine; and therefore 'tis impossible to conceive, how they can be the action or abstract mode of any substance" (T 1.4.5.27).

As shown above, Hume appeals to the principle in central parts of every metaphysical topic he addresses. There is no doubt that the principle plays a crucial role in Hume's philosophy. Therefore, by taking note of the principle, we can achieve a unified understanding of the topics of Hume's metaphysics. Along with the Conceivability Principle, Hume offers three other principles that support his philosophy; the Copy Principle, the Separability Principle, and the Principle of the Association of Ideas³). These principles should be understood as setting a condition by which to define the range of what is conceivable. Let us review these principles one by one. The first and most fundamental principle is the Copy Principle: "all our simple ideas in their first appearance, are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent" (T 1.1.1.7). This thesis is Hume's formulation of Locke's empiricist position that there are no innate ideas, and all ideas originate in impressions (perceptions). Hume considers ideas a weakened form of impressions. There is no difference between impressions and ideas except for their vivacity. We can compound simple ideas freely to form complex ideas that our real experience cannot give, like when we construct the idea of a unicorn. But, although simple ideas are impossible without corresponding simple impressions, simple impressions may be possible without corresponding simple ideas⁴).

As an empiricist, Hume treats ideas as imagistic, not abstract entities. Unlike his continental predecessors, he does not admit non-imagistic innate

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- 3) Don Garrett, "Hume's Theory of Ideas", in E.S. Radcliffe (ed.) *A Companion to Hume*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2008, pp. 41-57, Hume, London: Routledge, 2015, pp. 43-50, "Reason, Normativity and Hume's "Title Principles"", *Oxford Handbook of Hume*, Paul Russell (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020, pp. 32-53, Peter Kail, "Conceivability and Modality in Hume: A Lemma in an Argument in Defense of Skeptical Realism", *Hume Studies* 29.1, 2003, pp. 43-61.
 - 4) David Owen, "Hume and the Mechanics of Mind", *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd ed., David Fate Norton and Jaqueline Taylor (eds.), 2009, p. 74, note 5.

ideas. This is the basis for Hume's method for acquiring a standard for valid ideas; we can trace those ideas to their original impressions when they are meaningful. Some complex ideas do not have a distinct impression as their empirical origin. Hume explains those ideas by the Principle of the Association of Ideas; human nature has a natural tendency to associate similar objects. When we perceive a particular object, we naturally associate it with other similar objects that we remember. As these experiences are so frequent, we naturally come to give a particular term to the group of similar objects. Whenever we perceive an object, we regard it as representing the whole group and call it by the term we have given to the group. The reverse operation functions, as well: whenever we hear a term, we almost automatically remember a typical member of the group. We compare the new object with it, and when we find enough similarity, we recognize the new object as a member of the group referred to by the term. The vital function of the Copy Principle with regard to the Conceivability Principle is that it presents the criterion by which we come to have ideas in the first instance. Empirical origin of ideas is the first condition of conceivability. In other words, ideas that are not at all involved in the empirical origin are inconceivable.

Hume's second basic principle is the Separability Principle. Hume refers to this principle when he attempts to prove that "the mind cannot form any notion of quantity or quality without forming a precise notion of the degrees of each" (T 1.1.7.3). Hume defines it as follows: "Whatever objects are different are distinguishable, and whatever objects are distinguishable are separable by the thought and imagination", and the reverse proposition is also true; "whatever objects are separable are also distinguishable, and that whatever objects are distinguishable are also different" (ibid.). The Separability Principle can be understood as Hume's application of the separability of substances to the theory of perceptions. An appropriate application of this principle leads to a result of great significance: the distinction between ideas of cause and ideas of effect. However, an erroneous application of this principle results in the denial of the distinction between the particular quality of things and the things themselves, e. g. "the precise

length of a line" from "the line itself" (T 1.1.7.3). While the former is possible, the latter is impossible in our experience.

The important point we should bear in mind when we consider the Conceivability Principle is that the above three principles set the basic conditions for conceivability; first, the entities to be conceived are ideas that are derived from impressions, second, we should conceive ideas without breaching the Separability Principle, and third, we should conceive ideas following the principle of association. These conditions bind us when we conceive ideas. As Garrett mentions, "inferences from possibility in thought to possibility *tout court* are licensed by the Conceivability Principle"⁵). Therefore, if conceivability or inconceivability is asserted beyond those conditions, or in a way that contradicts those principles, those assertions will not be counted as legitimate in Hume's philosophy.

The relationship between the Copy Principle and the Conceivability Principle is especially important. The Copy Principle denies the existence of a simple idea that does not correspond to a corresponding simple impression. However, it does not specify what possible impression can exist that does not correspond to an idea. In Hume, the truth value of a belief is not determined by the congruence between separate ideas that compose a belief; belief can be produced from a single idea. In his argument about the existence, to conceive an idea can be a sufficient condition for the existence of its impression (T 1.2.6.2). Hume denied the conceivability of an idea of existence itself that does not accompany any particular impression or idea. The denial of the presence of an independent impression of existence is the condition for the possibility of simple ideas. In this way, the Copy Principle and the Conceivability Principle compensate for each other. Unlike the Copy Principle that explains the connections between impressions and ideas that stand in a relationship of cause and effect, the connection implied in the Conceivability Principle is not necessary but probable. Hume's theory of causation as a probable relation between two kinds of impressions, is an instance of the application of the Conceivability Principle; when the custom

5) Garrett (2015), p. 47.

of observing two similar kinds of events following one another is formed, it is conceivable that the similar pattern continues. However it remains to be a mere possibility because, apart from the psychological necessity, there is no logical connection between the two. Here, a question arises as to what distinguishes between conceivable and inconceivable.

2. Relationship to the continental philosophy

We can undoubtedly highlight the originality and importance of Hume's Conceivability Principle by placing it in a broader context of modern philosophy. Hume's Conceivability Principle is not generally connected with any specific historical sources. However, my claim is that it is most fundamentally a ramification of the ontological argument of the existence of God because the Conceivability Principle focuses on the relationship between our mental entity and the real existence. Surely, Hume's Conceivability Principle is not a direct reaction to the ontological demonstration itself but a critical response to its modern development from Descartes to his day.

As the metaphysical problem of the ontological argument revolves around the dichotomy between essence (*essentia*) and existence (*existentia*), so does the Conceivability Principle. It is a problem regarding the relationship between what exists in the mind and what exists in reality⁶). Cartesian dualism set the framework for considering the relationship between mental contents and material actuality. When Hume wrote that the Conceivability Principle is established in metaphysics, he most probably had in mind Descartes' argument⁷). According to Descartes, "it is just as much of a contradiction to think of God (that is, a supremely perfect being) lacking existence (that is, lacking a perfection), as it is to think of a mountain without

6) See Alvin Plantinga, "Ontological arguments", in "God, arguments for the existence of", in *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Taylor and Francis, 1998, <https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/god-arguments-for-the-existence-of/v-1/sections/ontological-arguments>, doi:10.4324/9780415249126-K029-1.

7) Pierre Saint-Germier, "Conceivability, Inconceivability and Cartesian Modal Epistemology", *Synthese*, 2018, 195: 4785.

a valley" (*Meditation of First Principle*, CSM II 46, AT VII 66)⁸). Hume is aware of this argument as he uses the same example of "mountain without a valley" as Descartes does (CSM I pp. 230-231, AT VIII A 50). Descartes also writes that "it must be noted that possible existence is contained in the concept or idea of everything that we clearly and distinctly understand" (*First Set of Replies*, CSM II 83, AT VII 116). For Descartes, a clear and distinct idea of objects in the extra-mental world is actually instantiated as it can be assured by God's veracity.

Descartes asserted the innateness of the theory of ideas. In order to propose the ontological demonstration of the existence of God, the vital abstract ideas must be innate and beyond any empirical challenges. Based on those innate ideas, the search for the most fundamental condition that makes all those conceptual constructions meaningful becomes possible. By the *Cogito* argument, Descartes established the standard of certain ideas that are just not possible. For Descartes, the certainty of ideas and the actuality of the ideas that are certain are different. Certain ideas can exist as themselves in mind, typical examples being those demonstrating mathematical truth. This background of Cartesian dualism posed a crucial difficulty. The difficulty is how to justify the correspondence between the two substances. Famously, in *the 6th Meditation*, Descartes argues that the existence of the body is guaranteed by neither sense nor imagination. There is still room for scepticism in that it is only deception on the part of the human mind. To remove this doubt, Descartes appeals to the veracity of God. It is only God who can deceive us into believing the existence of a body when, in fact, there is no corporeal or extended substance. However, as God is no deceiver, we can be assured that there is, in fact, a body as we

8) J. Cottingham, R. Stoothoff, and D. Murdoch (eds. and trans.), 1985-1991, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes* (Vol. I-II) [abbreviated as CSM I-II], Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. References to vol. I and II respectively are of the form "CSM I" or "CSM II" followed by the relevant page number. The CSM references are followed by references to the correspondening page in the standard twelve-volume edition of Descartes produced by Adam and Tannery; references to these pages are of the form "AT" followed by the relevant page number.

recognise it with clear and distinct perceptions. Descartes can assert this relationship between recognition and actuality and establish the role God plays in building their relationship. "I know that everything which I clearly and distinctly understand is capable of created by God so as to correspond exactly with my understanding of it" (CSM II 54, AT VII 78).

Let us note that the main point of Descartes' argument is the limitation of the Conceivability Principle; what is merely conceivable is not in itself enough as a condition for truth. This is significant for Hume, for were it not for the sincerity of God or were it not for God himself, there would not be any guarantee of their correspondence, and it would be reduced to a mere possibility.

The history of modern philosophy attests to the fact that Cartesian dualism represents a further development of the mind-body problem. Spinoza, with his monism, made the most crucial first step regarding this problem. According to Spinoza, Descartes' assertion created difficulty because he used the certainty of *Cogito* as grounds for the existence of mind as a substance. Descartes first established substance as that of self, then proceeded to establish the substance of the body as having certainty as a secondary consequence. In contrast to Descartes, Spinoza thought that mind and body were not entitled to claim the status of having substance because they were the creations of God. Instead, there can be only one substance, *Deus sive Natura*. Spinoza argued that it is impossible to know that there is more than one substance that can share the same attributes because we cannot recognise a substance other than through its attributes (*Ethica* part 1, prop. 5)⁹). Furthermore, since the same attributes refer to the same substance, we cannot distinguish different substances without presupposing that the difference of modes signifies the difference in substance. However, a difference of modes does not indicate a difference in their attributes through which alone substance can be known. Therefore, if there can only be one

9) Carl Gebhardt (ed.), *Spinoza Opera*, 4 vols., Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1925. Samuel Shirley (trans.), *Spinoza: Complete Works*, Indianapolis: Hackett, 2002.

actuality, our conception of that actuality is necessarily what is real¹⁰).

Spinoza claims that there is a correspondence between the attributes of thinking and extension. As they are just two aspects of the same entity, so they must correspond with one another. The logical conclusion of this ontological assertion is significant. The mental representation is the only description of the actuality. For each mental mode, there is only one extension-mode. Hence comes the most robust assertion of the necessitarianism: actuality is thoroughly rational. We can trace the sequences of the world by tracing logical sequences without being conditioned by God's veracity, as was the case with Descartes. Everything occurs as a necessary expression of God's only actuality. As there is only one actuality, its correct mental representation is determinate¹¹. Therefore, we can take Spinoza's theory as signifying the identification of possibility with necessity; what is conceivable is obviously possible, and what is genuinely possible is real, for if what is possible is not real, it was not possible after all. Hume apparently intends a critical appropriation of Spinoza in his Conceivability Principle. In our common world view our actuality does not seem to be the only possibility for us. Hume thought it necessary to recover the common sense idea of possibility from Spinoza's necessitarianism¹²). After Spinoza, Leibniz famously criticized both Cartesian ontological proof of the existence of God and Spinoza's identification of possibility and necessity¹³). It is obvious that

10) As Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne argue, Descartes and Hume explain the relationship between reality and thinking in an opposite direction; Descartes starts from reality and Hume the other way around. Tamar Gendler and John Hawthorne (eds.), *Conceivability and Possibility*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 15.

11) Hegel developed this thesis into the thesis that "what is rational is real and what is real is rational". (G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, Werke 7, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986, p. 24). His historical dialectics is founded on this thesis that was to be further developed in the materialistic dialectics by Karl Marx.

12) Michael Della Rocca, "Playing with Fire: Hume, Rationalism, and a little bit of Spinoza", *Oxford Handbook of Spinoza*, Michael Della Rocca (ed.), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 465-481.

13) Barry Loewer, Leibniz and the Ontological Argument, *Philosophical Studies* 34,

Hume had those continental development regarding conceivability in mind when he refers to the concept¹⁴⁾.

3. Conceivability and Inconceivability

Hume's Conceivability Principle has produced many disagreements¹⁵⁾. There is a famous controversy regarding the interpretation of the principle of whether inconceivability implies impossibility for Hume (call this the Inconceivability Principle)¹⁶⁾. Let us consider the criteria of conceivability by considering this controversy whether Hume positively asserts the Inconceivability Principle. The first point is that possibility and impossibility are not symmetrical in terms of the modality; Hume uses the notion of possibility as synonymous with probability, but there is no probability within impossibility. The possibility recognized in the Conceivability Principle is an open concept in that what is possible may not be actual. However, if the Inconceivability Principle is true and universally applicable, then what is inconceivable must necessarily be impossible. Hume takes the necessity expressed here as illegitimate, because necessity can only be a psychological concept and to assert necessity beyond human experience is subject to skepticism. Let us remember that for Spinoza, the possibility was

1978, pp. 105-109, James Patrick Downey, "Commentary on The Possibility of God", *Faith and Philosophy* 4.2, 1987, pp. 202-206, David Blumenfeld, "Leibniz's Ontological and Cosmological Arguments", in *The Cambridge Companion to Leibniz*, Nicholas Jolley (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006, Wolfgang Lenzen, "Leibniz's Ontological Proof of the Existence of God and the Problem of Impossible Objects", *Logica Universalis* 11, 2017, p. 86.

- 14) British tradition, especially Berkeley, deeply influenced Hume's Conceivability Principle, but I do not discuss it in this paper. See Thomas Holden, "Berkeley on Inconceivability and Impossibility", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 118.1, 2019, pp. 107-122.
- 15) Lightner (1997), Saint-Germier (2018), Albert Casullo, "Conceivability and Possibility", *Ratio: An International Journal of analytic Philosophy* 17, 1975, pp. 118-121.
- 16) Bo Chen and Jingxian Liu (2019), 29: 541-559. Garrett asserts that Hume does not endorse the Inconceivability Principle except for contradictory propositions. Garrett (2015), p. 49.

a necessity, and there was no room for liberty. Hume may have been aware of this because his project aimed to present a notion of possibility that was compatible with the common usage of the term. Hume criticized rationalist's conception of liberty for failing to be compatible with common sense.

Scepticism underlies all discussions that involve the Conceivability Principle, which explains Hume's ambiguous position regarding the connection of inconceivability and impossibility¹⁷). With scepticism, one can assert that conceivability implies possibility, but one cannot decide that inconceivability signifies impossibility. In the argument concerning the existence of a vacuum, Hume discusses the problem of whether there is nothing that can be the object of our senses. He finds no decisive argument on the matter of the existence of a vacuum.

If we carry our enquiry beyond the appearances of objects to the senses, I am afraid, that most of our conclusions will be full of scepticism and uncertainty. Thus if it be ask'd, whether or not the invisible and intangible distance be always full of *body*, or of something that by an improvement of our organs might become visible or tangible, I must acknowledge, that I find no very decisive arguments on either side; tho' I am inclin'd to the contrary opinion, as being more suitable to vulgar and popular notions (T 1.2.5.26n)¹⁸).

Here, if the problem is whether things that we cannot imagine at this moment are impossible, Hume clearly gives a negative answer. Unlike the case of the conceivability-possibility relationship, we cannot decide something to be impossible by our imagination. The gap between possibility and actuality must be bridged by future experiences. If this is not admitted, Hume's theory is none other than rationalism. But just as non-existence

17) John P. Wright, "Hume's Rejection of the Theory of Ideas", *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 8, 1991, pp. 149-162, R. S. Woolhouse, "From Conceivability to Possibility", *Ratio: An International Journal of Analytic Philosophy* 14, 1972, pp. 144-154.

18) Lightner (1997), p. 150.

cannot be empirically demonstrated, impossibility cannot be verified by experience. Therefore, the problem of approving the inconceivability as impossibility is to depreciate the essential role experience plays in Hume's philosophy.

It is appropriate to remember what is called "Hume's fork": Hume distinguishes "relations of ideas" and "matters of fact"¹⁹. This distinction corresponds to the distinction between "truths of reason" and "truths of facts" in Leibniz. To take an example of relations of ideas, the sum of interior angles is two right angles in Euclidean geometry. Here, what is inconceivable is obviously impossible. In the cases of truths of reason, there is no gap between subject and predicate. Thus, the inconceivable-impossible relationship is problematic in cases of matters of fact; truths of reason are definite and are known only by reasoning, while matters of fact are contingent, even though they also have truth value.

Thomas Reid, famously criticized Hume's Conceivability Principle by saying that there were many cases where what is conceivable is impossible²⁰. Reid criticizes the Conceivability Principle in the following ways:

The axiom, therefore, amounts to this: every proposition of which you understand meaning distinctly, is possible. I am persuaded, that I understand as distinctly the meaning of this proposition--- *Any two sides of a triangle are together equal to the third, --- as of this,--- Any two sides of a triangle are together greater than the third*, yet the first of these is impossible (EIP, chap. 4, sec. 3, p. 275)²¹.

19) Peter Millican, "Hume's Fork, and his Theory of Relations", *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 95.1, 2017, pp. 1-65.

20) Albert Casullo, "Reid and Mill on Hume's conceivability", *Analysis* 39, 1979, pp. 212-219, Lewis Powell, "How to Avoid Mis-Reiding Hume's Maxim of Conceivability", *The Philosophical Quarterly* 63, 2013, pp. 105-119.

21) Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Power of Man* (Philadelphia: Butler and Co, 1878, p. 275), <https://archive.org/details/10edessaysoninte00reiduoft/page/274> (Accessed 05/Jan./2020), Albert Casullo (1979), p. 212, Powell (2013), pp. 105-119.

Reid takes understanding the meaning of a proposition to be sufficient for Hume's conceivability²². However, Hume apparently did not mean the mere comprehensibility of a proposition as being a condition of conceivability²³. By eliminating the comprehensibility of a proposition as a criterion for conceivability, the latter becomes clearer.

Reid's criticism commits an error of mistaking the relation of ideas for matters of fact; the proposition that any two sides of a triangle are together equal to the third is known to be false as a relation of ideas. Therefore, Reid's example is not an example of conceivability in Hume's sense. It is also inappropriate to identify Hume's inconceivability as implying impossibility from the perspective of his religious theory²⁴. In his *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion* (1779), many arguments suggest the inconceivability of God's existence.

Any particle of matter, 'tis said, may be *conceived* to be annihilated; and any form may be *conceived* to be altered. Such an annihilation or alteration, therefore, is not impossible. But it seems a great partiality not to perceive, that the same argument extends equally to the Deity, so far as we have any conception of him; and that the mind can at least imagine him to be non-existent, or his attributes to be altered. It must be some unknown, inconceivable qualities, which can make his non-existence appear impossible, or his attributes unalterable: And no reason can be assigned, why these qualities may not belong to matter. As they are altogether unknown and inconceivable, they can never

22) Albert Casullo (1979), pp. 212ff. Casullo points out that there is a difference between understanding and conceiving a proposition.

23) For a more substantial discussion on Reid's criticism, see Casullo (1979), Powell (2013).

24) For a consideration of the significance of the Conceivability Principle in Hume's *Dialogues*, see Naoki Yajima, "Why did not Hume become an Atheist?: The Influence of Butler on Hume's *Dialogues*", *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* 16.3, 2017, pp. 249-260.

be proved incompatible with it (Hume, 2007 [1779], part 9, para.7)²⁵.

Here, it is asserted that God's inconceivable quality may belong to matter. It need not concern us who makes this claim in Hume's fictitious work. The point is that Hume considers this assertion something meaningful. To say the least, inconceivable does not mean impossible. Also, Hume nowhere asserts the impossibility of God's existence because God is inconceivable. More crucially, there is a sense that the Inconceivability Principle works contrary to the Conceivability Principle. The whole point of the Conceivability Principle is to vindicate a notion of possibility that requires very little metaphysical commitment. Even though a contradictory thing cannot exist, not all inconceivable things are obviously contradictory. The fact that Hume stays open on the connection between inconceivability and impossibility lends another circumstantial evidence that he did not have such implications about the principle.

4. Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have examined Hume's Conceivability Principle in relation to other basic principles and also in comparison with his continental predecessors. As has been discussed and confirmed above, Hume appeals to the principle in all important topics of his metaphysics. Therefore, we can illuminate Hume's system by focusing on this principle. We have demonstrated that the Conceivability Principle provides Hume's definition of possibility as a condition of human experience. Then, we considered the controversy regarding the inconceivability thesis. Most importantly, we contrasted Hume's principle with Spinoza's rationalist thesis that what is reasonable is possible and what is possible is necessary. Hume argued against Spinoza's necessitarianism and the denial of liberty with his principle. Conceivability is a natural and open concept in that what conceivability means, or how to decide whether something is conceivable or

25) David Hume, *Dialogues concerning Natural Religion and other writings*, Dorothy Coleman (ed.), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 65.

not, is left to be discussed among the relevant groups of people. In this sense, Hume's philosophy is related to public scrutiny and its discursive practice. Although this paper is only a brief overview of the background of the critical principle of Hume, as well as problems relating to it, we have at least shown the importance of Hume's Conceivability Principle which deserves further consideration for the analysis of Hume's entire metaphysics²⁶).

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Summary

This paper discusses Hume's Conceivability Principle, according to which whatever we conceive is possible, at least in a metaphysical sense. Although this principle is not thoroughly argued by commentators, Hume relies on this principle in almost all significant arguments of his metaphysics. The principle is involved in the crucial relationship between mind and reality of modern philosophy. Therefore, it is possible to find a relevant counterargument of this principle in metaphysics from Descartes to Berkeley. This paper focuses narrowly on the comparison between Hume vis Descartes, and Hume vis Spinoza, and elucidates that Hume's innovation of this principle intends the transformation of the concept of necessity, and development of the concept of probability. This paper also offers a possible solution to a famous interpretative problem regarding the relationship between what is inconceivable and impossibility, and with it, the fundamental character of Hume's empiricism and scepticism will be clarified. This paper thus aims to be a preliminary consideration for clarifying the intricate connection between the Conceivability Principle and Hume's entire metaphysics.