Reid vs. Hume on The Objects of Belief
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My Goals in this Talk
I aim to show that Hume’s reistic theory of belief is more defensible than it might, at first seem. I contrast Hume’s view with Reid’s, in order to examine the purported advantages of a propositional theory of belief.

The Argument Against Hume
1. The objects of belief possess predicative structure.
2. On David Hume’s view, the objects of belief do not possess predicative structure.
3. So, David Hume’s view is incorrect.

Hume’s Intriguing Position
But I go farther; and not content with asserting, that the conception of the existence of any object is no addition to the simple conception of it, I likewise maintain, that the belief of the existence joins no new ideas to those which compose the idea of the object. When I think of God, when I think of him as existent, and when I believe him to be existent, my idea of him neither encreases nor diminishes. But as ‘tis certain there is a great difference betwixt the simple conception of the existence of an object, and the belief of it, and as this difference lies not in the parts or composition of the idea, which we conceive; it follows, that it must lie in the manner, in which we conceive it.

T 1.3.7, p. 94

What we may in general affirm concerning these three acts of the understanding [i.e. conception, judgment, and reasoning] is, that taking them in a proper light, they all resolve themselves into the first, and are nothing but particular ways of conceiving our objects.

T 1.3.7, 96-7fn

Hume’s Compelling (?) Argument
H1. The ideational content of conceiving of O is just the idea of O.
H2. Conceiving of O is the same as conceiving that O exists.
H3. Conceiving that O exists has the same ideational content as believing that O exists.
H4. So, the ideational content of believing that O exists is just the idea of O.

Belief In vs. Belief That
B1. James believes that ghosts exist.
Some Things Reid Says

Neither can I reconcile [this first principle] with Mr HUME’s theory, that to believe the existence of any thing, is nothing else than to have a strong and lively conception of it; or, at most, that belief is only some modification of the idea which is the object of belief. For not to mention, that propositions, not ideas, are the objects of belief; in all that variety of thoughts and passions, of which we are conscious, we believe the existence of the weak as well as of the strong, the faint as well as the lively. No modification of the operations of our minds disposes us to the least doubt of their real existence.

EIP 6.5, p. 471

Yet it may be observed that even a proposition may be simply apprehended without forming any judgment of its truth or falsehood: For it is one thing to conceive the meaning of a proposition; it is another thing to judge it to be true or false.

EIP 1.1, p. 25

Similar concerns raised in Stroud [1977]

The Lockean Basis for this Concern:

THOUGH Truth and Falshood belong, in Propriety of Speech, only to Propositions; yet Ideas are oftentimes termed true or false (as what Words are there, that are not used with great Latitude, and with some deviation from their strict and proper Significations?) Though, I think, that when Ideas themselves are termed true or false, there is still some secret or tacit Proposition, which is the Foundation of that Denomination: as we shall see, if we examine the particular Occasions, wherein they come to be called true or false.

Essay, 2.32.1, p. 348

Truth-assessability

T1. Janet’s belief that the sun exists is true.
T2. Janet’s imagining of the sun is true.

An Argument Only Locke Could Give:

L1. Mental states are assessable as true or false solely in virtue of their objects.
L2. Mere conception is not truth-assessable.
L3. Belief is truth-assessable.
L4. So, conception and belief have different objects.

Hope for Hume?

Anyone who thinks conceptions and beliefs can have the same objects has to offer a story about why beliefs are truth-assessable, and conceptions are not. Such a story undermines the purported advantage of propositional objects for tackling truth-assessability.

Concluding Remarks