Hume: A Treatise of Human Nature

Part IV: Of the Sceptical and Other Systems of Philosophy, Section VI: Of Personal Identity (excerpts)[1]
PHIL101
Prof. Oakes

Section II: What is the Self?
Reading II.4

David Hume (1711-1776) was a Scottish philosopher who challenged many of the metaphysical and epistemological orthodoxies of the Modern age. His primary targets were his predecessors Descartes and John Locke. Rather than penetrating to the true essence of reality, Hume saw human thought as largely a practical faculty much imbued with habit. His critique of human knowledge, in particular, remains an important touchstone in contemporary thought.

Hume challenges us to be clear about the exact content of our thoughts. When we speak of "the self", in particular, what, exactly, are we talking about? What is the "content" of that idea, exactly? When we raise and carefully pursue such questions, Hume believes, we may find that the world we take for granted is not at all the world that we can say we know to be real.

Pay particular attention, in the following, to Hume's discussion of our idea of self. What is the content of this idea, exactly, and from where might we understand it to derive? What is the relationship between the self and our perceptions (i.e., experiences – sensations, thoughts, etc.)? Note, too, Hume's discussion of our concept of identity over time: what is it, exactly, for a thing to be the same thing, at a later time, as it was at an earlier time?

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on self either by their pain or pleasure. To attempt a farther proof of this were to weaken its evidence; since no proof can be derived from any fact, of which we are so intimately conscious; nor is there any thing, of which we can be certain, if we doubt of this.

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of self, after the manner it is here explained. For from what impression could this idea be derived? This question it is impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity; and yet it is a question, which must necessarily be answered, if we would have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible. It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the

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[1] Hume, David. (2003) *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Project Gutenberg. http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm (Public Domain). For an updated English translation, see Jonathan Bennett, Some Texts from Early Modern Philosophy: Early Modern Texts – Treatise of Human nature, Book I http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/htb.html.

whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea.

But farther, what must become of all our particular perceptions upon this hypothesis? All these are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately considered, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence. After what manner, therefore, do they belong to self; and how are they connected with it? For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of myself, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. If any one, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection thinks he has a different notion of himself, I must confess I call reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.

But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed.

What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence through the whole course of our lives? In order to answer this question, we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves. The first is our present subject; and to explain it perfectly we must take the matter pretty deep, and account for that identity, which we attribute to plants and animals; there being a great analogy betwixt it, and the identity of a self or person.

We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted through a supposed variation of time; and this idea we call that of identity or sameness. We have also a distinct idea of several different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation; and this to an accurate view affords as perfect a notion of diversity, as if there was no manner of relation among the objects. But though these two ideas of identity, and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct, and even contrary, yet it is certain, that in our common way of thinking they are generally confounded with each other. That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable object, and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, are almost the same to the feeling, nor is there much more effort of thought required in the latter case than in the former. The relation facilitates the transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage as smooth as if it contemplated one continued object. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects. However at one instant we may consider the related succession as variable or interrupted, we are sure the next to ascribe to it a perfect identity, and regard it as enviable and uninterrupted. Our propensity to this mistake is so great from the resemblance above-mentioned, that we fall into it before we are aware; and though we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination. Our last resource is to yield to it, and boldly assert that these different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to

ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continued existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption: and run into the notion of a soul, and self, and substance, to disguise the variation. But we may farther observe, that where we do not give rise to such a fiction, our propension to confound identity with relation is so great, that we are apt to imagine something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts, beside their relation; and this I take to be the case with regard to the identity we ascribe to plants and vegetables. And even when this does not take place, we still feel a propensity to confound these ideas, though we are not able fully to satisfy ourselves in that particular, nor find any thing invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity.

Thus the controversy concerning identity is not merely a dispute of words. For when we attribute identity, in an improper sense, to variable or interrupted objects, our mistake is not confined to the expression, but is commonly attended with a fiction, either of something invariable and uninterrupted, or of something mysterious and inexplicable, or at least with a propensity to such fictions. What will suffice to prove this hypothesis to the satisfaction of every fair enquirer, is to show from daily experience and observation, that the objects, which are variable or interrupted, and yet are supposed to continue the same, are such only as consist of a succession of parts, connected together by resemblance, contiguity, or causation. For as such a succession answers evidently to our notion of diversity, it can only be by mistake we ascribe to it an identity; and as the relation of parts, which leads us into this mistake, is really nothing but a quality, which produces an association of ideas, and an easy transition of the imagination from one to another, it can only be from the resemblance, which this act of the mind bears to that, by which we contemplate one continued object, that the error arises. Our chief business, then, must be to prove, that all objects, to which we ascribe identity, without observing their invariableness and uninterruptedness, are such as consist of a succession of related objects.

In order to this, suppose any mass of matter, of which the parts are contiguous and connected, to be placed before us; it is plain we must attribute a perfect identity to this mass, provided all the parts continue uninterruptedly and invariably the same, whatever motion or change of place we may observe either in the whole or in any of the parts. But supposing some very small or inconsiderable part to be added to the mass, or subtracted from it; though this absolutely destroys the identity of the whole, strictly speaking; yet as we seldom think so accurately, we scruple not to pronounce a mass of matter the same, where we find so trivial an alteration. The passage of the thought from the object before the change to the object after it, is so smooth and easy, that we scarce perceive the transition, and are apt to imagine, that it is nothing but a continued survey of the same object.

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This may be confirmed by another phenomenon. A change in any considerable part of a body destroys its identity; but it is remarkable, that where the change is produced gradually and insensibly we are less apt to ascribe to it the same effect. The reason can plainly be no other, than that the mind, in following the successive changes of the body, feels an easy passage from the surveying its condition in one moment to the viewing of it in another, and at no particular time perceives any interruption in its actions. From which continued perception, it ascribes a continued existence and identity to the object.

But whatever precaution we may use in introducing the changes gradually, and making them proportionable to the whole, it is certain, that where the changes are at last observed to become considerable, we make a scruple of ascribing identity to such different objects. There is, however, another artifice, by which we may induce the imagination to advance a step farther; and that is, by producing a reference of the parts to each other, and a combination to some common end or purpose. A ship, of which a considerable part has been changed by frequent reparations, is still considered as the same; nor does the difference of the materials hinder us from ascribing an identity to it. The common end, in which the parts conspire, is the same under all their variations, and affords an easy transition of the imagination from one situation of the body to another.[2]

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[2] Hume here refers to the "Ship of Theseus," which, in ancient legend, lay for centuries in the harbor of Athens. Gradually replaced, piece by piece, it became the object of philosophical speculation: after the process of gradual replacement, was it the same ship as was originally

But this is still more remarkable, when we add a sympathy of parts to their common end, and suppose that they bear to each other, the reciprocal relation of cause and effect in all their actions and operations. This is the case with all animals and vegetables; where not only the several parts have a reference to some general purpose, but also a mutual dependence on, and connexion with each other. The effect of so strong a relation is, that though every one must allow, that in a very few years both vegetables and animals endure a total change, yet we still attribute identity to them, while their form, size, and substance are entirely altered. An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak; though there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same. An infant becomes a man-, and is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any change in his identity.

We may also consider … that though we commonly be able to distinguish pretty exactly betwixt numerical and specific identity,[3] yet it sometimes happens, that we confound them, and in our thinking and reasoning employ the one for the other. Thus a man, who hears a noise, that is frequently interrupted and renewed, says, it is still the same noise; though it is evident the sounds have only a specific identity or resemblance, and there is nothing numerically the same, but the cause, which produced them. In like manner it may be said without breach of the propriety of language, that such a church, which was formerly of brick, fell to ruin, and that the parish rebuilt the same church of free-stone, and according to modern architecture. Here neither the form nor materials are the same, nor is there any thing common to the two objects, but their relation to the inhabitants of the parish; and yet this alone is sufficient to make us denominate them the same. But we must observe, that in these cases the first object is in a manner annihilated before the second comes into existence; by which means, we are never presented in any one point of time with the idea of difference and multiplicity: and for that reason are less scrupulous in calling them the same.

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We now proceed to explain the nature of personal identity, which has become so great a question in philosophy, especially of late years in England, where all the abstruser sciences are studyed with a peculiar ardour and application. And here it is evident, the same method of reasoning must be continued which has so successfully explained the identity of plants, and animals, and ships, and houses, and of all the compounded and changeable productions either of art or nature. The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects.

Commentary

Hume's first target, in the above, is our ordinary idea of the self. This idea, he notes, entails the continuous existence of some, one thing – a self: myself, yourself – over the period of a life. This is a familiar and seemingly fundamental idea: "We are "certain" of "its perfect identity and simplicity." Yet, Hume argues, close inspection appears to reveal that nothing in our experience conforms to this idea. There is nothing in our experience, he thinks, that we could call the same one simple thing persisting throughout our lives.[4] Moreover, not only is there nothing in our experience corresponding to such an idea, the idea itself, the idea of a "self" would appear thus to

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moored in the harbor, or not? See Plutarch's *Theseus* for our oldest account of the story and the question that it raised.

[3] I.e., numerical and qualitative identity. Numerical identity consists in being one and the same thing, while qualitative identity consists in have the same qualities – properties, features.

[4] *Persistence* is the fact of numerical identity over time. I.e., if a thing persists, then we will find it located at more than one time – typically, a continuous succession of times. As we ordinarily think of it, we, ourselves, persist, as do a host of the objects in our surroundings.

be an *empty* idea – i.e., there is no such idea at all. How does Hume come to these extraordinary conclusions?

Note the reference early on that Hume makes to *ideas* and *impressions*. "It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea," he states. What does this assertion mean, exactly? Hume believes that the contents of the human mind fall into two basic classes, namely, ideas and impressions. Impressions are the basic data of sense, roughly speaking. Each sight and sound is an "impression" on the mind. For example, the sensation of *blue* that one has when looking at a blue sky is an impression, on this use of the term, as is the smell of honey or the feeling of the prick of a pin. In addition to impressions, we also have ideas, in our minds. That is, in addition to the mental sensation of blue, an impression, we also have the *idea* of blue. We have many other ideas, too, of course, including those of honey, pin-pricks, happiness, inter-planetary travel, the number five, and so on. Where do these ideas come from? How do they come to our minds? Hume's answer is that they are in some sense "copies" of impressions. The idea of blue comes from the sense experience of blue. The idea of honey is informed by the smell and sight of honey, along with the tactile sensation of its stickiness. Ideas such as blue are relatively simple deriving from single impressions, while others such as honey or inter-planetary travel are compounds of multiple impressions. As an empiricist, Hume believes that all of our ideas must have their source in some one or more impressions.[5]

With this in mind, consider, now, the idea of "self". If it's a genuine idea, then, like all ideas, Hume thinks, it must come from some impression or perhaps some set of impressions. What, then, asks Hume, might be our *impression* of self? We know the impression from which we derive the idea of *blue*. What idea is it from which we derive the idea of *self*? An inventory of our impressions, Hume asserts, appears to yield no such impression. He reaches this conclusion by relatively simple means. First of all, supposing the *self* to continue to be the same one self over time, we should find in our minds some one impression that is always the same over time. As the idea of something persisting in our experience, the idea of self would have to derive from some impression that itself is always present in our experience. But, Hume asserts, there appears to be no such impression: there is no impression – no sensation or experiential content – that persists throughout all of our experiences. Rather, observes Hume, "Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time." Our minds, in other words, are a continually changing series of experiences – impressions and ideas – wherein no single impression or idea is always, invariably the same. And if this is so, then it would appear that there is no candidate for the impression from which we derive the idea of a persisting, self-same self.

Second, Hume argues, not only is no single impression constant throughout our experience, but no single impression appears to be an impression of "self" in the first place. When we reflect on the experiences that we have, we find experiences of many things: "heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure." But none of *these* things is "me"; these are *other* things – heat, cold, light, love, and so on. Indeed, every perception that we have appears to be a perception of *something else*, something *other* than me. As we look at our perceptions, we might report, as Hume writes, " I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception."

So, if we have only impressions of *other* things, and if no impression is constant and invariable" over time, then, it would seem, there is no impression from which the idea of self could derive. And this, says Hume, means that there *is* no such idea as the self. This startling, further

[5] *Empiricism* is the epistemological doctrine that the primary source of human knowledge is sensation. It may be contrasted with *Rationalism*, the doctrine that the primary source of human knowledge is reason.

conclusion requires some explanation. If we accept, with Hume, that there seems to be no impression of self, then we may fairly ask, what exactly is the content of the idea of self? What, exactly, do I refer to when I say, "myself" or "I"? For Hume, all there is to refer to is "a bundle or collection of different perceptions." But this bundle or stream of perceptions is one including no impression of a self. At most, then, the idea of self simply refers us back to impressions that are of other things – heat and cold, light and dark, the smell of honey – but never any distinct thing, other than these, that we could properly call "self".

Hume goes on to speculate as to the origin of our mistaken belief in the "self". Given that we lack the idea of self, why are we so convinced that we have the idea, and that it is among the most important of our ideas? In order to answer this question, Hume develops arguments to show a further, startling claim: that not only is there no idea of a persisting self, but our idea of persisting *object* itself appears to be empty. We are inclined to ignore slight differences between an object as we encounter it at one time and "the same" object as we encounter it at another time. In fact, however, not two experiences are experiences of the same one object over time. It is perhaps simply a degree of laziness that enables the mind "an easy passage" from the ideas of two similar but distinct impressions to the idea of one, identical impression at two different times. Carfull attention to the habits of mind of the human mind, for Hume, goes farther in explaining the world of our understanding than do "abstruse" metaphysics.

Ask Yourself

1. What is the difference between an impression and an idea, as Hume uses these terms?
2. What are our impressions impressions *of*, exactly?
3. What is Hume's argument for our lacking the idea of "self"? Can you write this argument in standard form?
4. Why does Hume think that we lack the experience of any object's persistence through time?