



Hume's Second Thoughts on the Self

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HUME'S SECOND THOUGHTS ON THE SELF*

1. Although the appendix in which Hume confesses disillusionment with the Treatise theory of personal identity is very puzzling and confusing, there have been few serious attempts to explicate it. Wade L. Robison's recent paper, "Hume on Personal Identity,"¹ goes a long way toward making up for this lack, and I concur with much of what Robison says. Nonetheless, I think further light can be shed on Hume's thinking, and I will attempt to do so in what follows.

2. Hume reports that a review of his discussion of personal identity reveals problems so severe and difficult that he does not "know how to correct my former opinions, or how to render them consistent." After summarizing the arguments that led him to the Treatise view of personal identity, he offers this explanation of the discovery inconsistency:

In short, there are two principles which I cannot render consistent, nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, vis. that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences. (636)²

The trouble with this explanation is that there appears to be no inconsistency at all between these two principles. Many commentators have simply passed over this fact, perhaps because Hume's theory of self-identity has seemed so reposterous that they have felt it obvious that he would be unhappy with it.

This paper grew out of my contribution to a colloquium at the 1974 Eastern Division Meeting of the American Philosophical Association. I would like to express my thanks to Norman Melchert, whose paper stimulated my work on this topic.

Others -- such as Norman Kemp Smith and John Passmore, in addition to Robison -- have claimed that Hume was incorrect in placing the inconsistency and have suggested more suitable candidates for the source of Hume's doubts. This failure to take the author at his word about what disturbed him may appear too presumptuous a move for a commentator to make, but the appendix provides strong evidence that Hume was quite confused and could easily have misstated or misidentified his problem. For example, Hume begins by saying that he will offer the arguments "on both sides" -- that is, the arguments that led him to adopt this theory of personal identity and those now causing him to doubt it. In fact, however, while he gives a neat summary of the arguments for the Treatise theory, he says nothing about the grounds for his new doubts. In addition, the statement of the two principles is introduced by the words "in short," as if Hume were providing a mere summary of what he had just said. The preceding passage, however, makes no mention of and is in no way concerned with the two principles. What is offered as a summary is no summary at all. Added to the apparent consistency of the two principles, these facts provide strong grounds for thinking Hume was quite confused. As such, they support those commentators who have felt forced to look elsewhere for the source of Hume's dissatisfaction.

Robison's most concise statements of his own interpretation of the problem are as follows:

Hume's explanation of why we think we have an idea of the self depends upon there being a self... But he has argued that we can have no idea of such a self so that we cannot conceive it as existing, let alone guarantee its existence. (190)

...we all think we have an idea of the self... Hume has to explain this fact, and ...the sort of explanation he used appeals to the existence of an active self distinct from any bundle of perceptions and propensities... (192)

Robison is correct, I think, on the basic point: the inconsistency is between Hume's bundle analysis of the self and his explanation of why we mistakenly believe there is a per-

sistent self. I differ with him, however, on two points. First, I think that his contrast between an active mind and a set of propensities is incorrect. That the Humean self has propensities is itself sufficient to generate Hume's problem. Second, although I agree with Robison in his rejection of Kemp Smith's appeal to an awareness of personal identity as the source of inconsistency, I disagree with Robison's statement that the Treatise theory is

inconsistent neither with our having the idea of the self nor with our thinking we have the idea... it is inconsistent with having to have the idea of self. (192)

I shall argue below that Hume's explanatory theory provides us with a legitimate idea of mind or self which is not assimilable to the bundle theory. The problem is simply that we have an idea of self, not that we "have to have" one.

3. I will now turn to a closer analysis of the appendix. Some of what I have to say will support Robison, since he and I locate the inconsistency in the same general area, but points concerning the specific nature of the inconsistency will diverge from his view.

The first thing to attempt to do is to discover the exact view that Hume felt he had to reconsider. This is no easy task, since his view of personal identity consists (appropriately enough) not of a single thesis but rather a bundle of theses. In the body of the Treatise, he had written:

What we call a mind is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos'd, tho' falsely, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity. (207)

The appendix refers to the argument which

induc'd me to deny the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking being. (633)

Further, mentioning that philosophers have begun to accept that our idea of physical objects reduced to our idea of

particular qualities, he says:

This must pave the way for a like principle with regard to the mind, that we have no notion of it, distinct from the particular perceptions. (635)

Finally, he tells us that there would be no difficulty if, contrary to fact,

our perceptions either inhere[d] in something simple and individual, or the mind perceive[d] some real connexion among them... (636)

Since there are five distinct (though related) positions here, one may easily go wrong in specifying the part of Hume's theory that is the source of his dissatisfaction. The five theses are (1) that the mind is no more than a collection of perceptions; (2) that the mind is not a simple entity possessing strict and proper identity; (3) that we have no notion of the mind distinct from our ideas of particular perceptions; (4) that our perceptions do not inhere in anything simple; and (5) that there are no real connections among perceptions.

There are three clues in the appendix as to the exact source of Hume's worries. The most explicit one refers us to the allegedly inconsistent two principles, but we have had to reject it. The other two are as follows:

But having thus loosen'd all our particular perceptions, when I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective... (635)

But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles that unite our successive perceptions in thoughts or consciousness. (635-36)

Both these passages identify Hume's problem as a defect in his theory about the principles which result in perceptions being united and mistakenly thought to belong to a single substantial self. Now, one might think that these principles are precisely the two which Hume says are inconsistent. However, these two principles, along with the empiricist

theory of ideas copying impressions, imply the impossibility of our having the idea of a single self and lead to the dissolution of the self into a mere bundle. They cannot be the principles to which Hume is now referring, for the principles he has in mind in these earlier lines serve to join distinct perceptions, not to sever them.

If we look back at the sections of the Treatise where Hume explains the apparent unity of the mind, we find that his explanation committed him to the existence of persisting tendencies or dispositions of mind which, if acknowledged, give a meaning to the phrase "the mind" which is not exhausted by talk about bundles of perceptions. Contrary to the theses I have designated #1 and #3, which constitute the bundle theory, Hume's psychological explanation commits him both to our having an idea of the mind distinct from the idea we have of distinct perceptions and to there being a mind (in the sense of a set of dispositions) which is more than a set of perceptions.

Hume's answer to the question of why we mistakenly believe in a single, persistent self is that there is a propensity of the mind to mistake instances of successive objects for instances of identity. The feeling of contemplating a single object is so like the feeling of contemplating a succession of related ones that the resemblance

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... Our propensity to this mistake is so great... that we fall into it before we are aware; and tho' we incessantly correct ourselves by reflexion, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this bias from the imagination. (274)

Hume stresses that the tendency to confuse successions of related objects is a deep one, which is not eradicable by philosophical reflection. This and other "seemingly trivial principles of the imagination" (254n) are basic, persistent features of the mind.

What Hume says here is no mere slip nor slight departure from his bundle theory, for in effect the basic theory of the Treatise is precisely a theory of the mental dispositions that constitute human understanding and which give rise to our beliefs about space, time, physical objects, causation and the self.³ The fundamental problem that Hume begins to recognize in the appendix is the incompatibility between his analysis of the self and his central explanatory principles. If there are basic, persisting dispositions of mind, then the self is no mere bundle of perceptions.

4. Much of what I have just argued is consistent with Robison's view and supplemental to it. Let me now turn to disagreements. First, I have identified the inconsistency in a very straightforward manner. Hume's bundle analysis implied:

- a) We have no idea of the self or mind distinct from perceptions.

His explanatory account implies:

- b) We have an idea of the self or mind as possessing basic dispositions, in addition to individual perceptions.

There is no mystery or obscurity about how these propositions conflict with each other.

Contrast this with Robison's saying that Hume's principles are "inconsistent with having to have the idea of self." (192) This is one of the very few places in Robison's paper where he obscures matters, rather than clarifying them. Just what sort of necessity does he have in mind here? And what is "having to have the idea" inconsistent with? Presumably, the answer must be that it is inconsistent with the view that we do not have to have the idea of the self. Hume, however, seems committed to no such proposition, and Robison offers no evidence for this view having been Hume's. It is, in fact, not clear that Robison even attributes it to Hume, but in that case, the in-

consistency is left unexplained.

Why did Robison reject the more straightforward interpretation I have suggested, especially after seeing it to be the most natural view? He writes:

What would be inconsistent with [Hume's principles] ...with, that is, our not having the idea of the self, would be our having the idea. This was Kemp Smith's suggestion, but Hume never gave up the view that we do not have that idea. (191)

Robison had earlier rejected Kemp Smith's view that there occurs an awareness of personal identity, claiming that this could only mean that there was an impression of the self. There is no doubt that Hume never rejected his belief that no such an impression occurs. My claim is that Hume's explanatory apparatus gives content to the idea of self or mind in terms of its dispositions without requiring that there be a direct awareness or impression of the self. Dispositions are not introspectible items, and the idea of self (distinct from a perception-bundle) to which Hume is committed has its basis in theory, not immediate experience.

We can at this point well appreciate Hume's sense of frustration. His psychological theory generates an idea of the mind distinct from perceptions. This conflicts not only with his bundle analysis of the self, but also with his empiricist doctrine of the dependence of all ideas on prior impressions. The roots of the difficulty that Hume has stumbled on lie deep within his philosophy.

5. The second point of difference between my view and Robison's has to do with the exact nature of the self which plays a role in Hume's explanatory theory. In a remark I quoted earlier, Robison states that Hume's theory commits him "to the existence of an active self distinct from any bundle of perceptions and propensities..."(192) This statement makes it look as if (1) the problem arises

only if an active self is involved and (2) the official theory of the Treatise can sanction a self composed of perceptions and dispositions.

As I see it, Hume's problem arises because his theory requires that there be mental dispositions or propensities. It does not matter whether they are dispositions to act or to be acted upon. The main point is that a bundle of perceptions and propensities is a bundle which contains more than Hume's analysis of the idea of self can allow. Propensities are not perceptions. To have an idea of a self with propensities is to have an idea of a self which is more than a bundle of perceptions. We need look no further for the source of Hume's troubles.

Now, one might object that the existence of propensities presents no problem for Hume because propensities have no independent ontological status and because the propensities Hume needs are propensities of perceptions. Hence, the bundle of perceptions and propensities is really no more than a bundle of perceptions.⁴

This objection is neither foolish nor lacking in textual support, and it raises some important questions about the status of the principle of association in Hume's work. Does the principle of association amount to no more than a relation among ideas, so that ideas which are resembling, contiguous or causally related will have a tendency to lead to each other? Or, does the principle of association hold between the mind and its ideas, so that there is a propensity for the mind, when confronted with one member of a set of resembling, contiguous or causally related ideas, to have a thought of other members of that set? On the first interpretation, the principle of association is reducible to the principles of resemblance, contiguity and causality. On the second, it is an additional mental tendency to link ideas which resemble each other, are contiguous, or causally related.

There are parts of the text that support each read-

ing. Nonetheless, the stronger case can be made for the view that association is not merely a relation among ideas. Consider these passages from Book I, Section iv.

The qualities, from which this association arise, and by which the mind is... conveyed from one idea to another are three, viz. RESEMBLANCE, CONTIGUITY ... and CAUSE and EFFECT. (11)

These are therefore the principles of union or cohesion among our simple ideas, and in the imagination supply the place of that inseparable connexion, by which they are united in our memory. Here is a kind of ATTRACTION, which in the mental world will be found to have as extraordinary effects as in the natural. (12-13)

The latter passage, with its famous analogy with gravitation, suggests that as gravitation is exerted between units of matter, so association is exerted between units of thought. The analogy is misleading in that respect, however, for the association that is established is not simply between perceptions. It is a connection "in the imagination" and in the memory. Likewise, the first passage enumerates the qualities that cause the mind to be "convey'd from one idea to another."

That the propensities I am invoking are properties of mind, rather than of perceptions, is further supported by this illuminating passage:

I must distinguish in the imagination betwixt the principles which are permanent, irresistible, and universal ... and the principles, which are changeable, weak, and irregular... The former are the foundation of all our thoughts and actions, so that upon their removal human nature must immediately perish and go to ruin. (225)

These principles, Hume here tells us, are the foundation of all our thoughts, not merely features of the thought: themselves.

6. There is a further objection to my view which is somewhat Humean in spirit and which I shall briefly consider. I have argued that Hume's commitment to mental dis-

positions shows that there is a sense of "mind" which is not captured by the bundle theory. One might argue, however, that we have no idea of the mind simply by virtue of having an idea of these propensities. Since we do not know what these propensities are properties of, we cannot be said to have an idea of mind itself. At the risk of sounding too Lockean, I would suggest that the proper reply here is that we do have an idea of the mind as the possessor of propensities, even if we are ignorant of the intrinsic features of mind which give rise to these propensities. Hume had this answer available to him. Indeed, he said as much when, after likening association to gravity, he wrote:

Its effects are everywhere conspicuous; but as to causes, they are mostly unknown, and must be resolv'd into original qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain. Nothing is more requisite for a true philosopher, than to restrain the intemperate desire of searching into causes... when he sees a farther examination would lead him into obscure and uncertain speculations. (13)

While a reference to substance at this point would provide no explanations, it would serve as a reminder that there was more to be explained. This is something that a consistent bundle theorist could not even acknowledge.

7. I have argued that the appendix reflects Hume's awareness that his psychological theory conflicted with the bundle analysis of the self. On this Robison and I agree. I have differed with his account on the precise nature of the discovered contradiction and on the role played by propensities in generating this set of problems.

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1. Journal of the History of Philosophy, XII (1974), pp. 181-93.
2. Page references are to the Selby-Bigge edition of the Treatise, the 1888 edition as reprinted by Oxford University Press in 1965.
3. For a detailed discussion emphasizing the role of mental dispositions, see Robert Wolff's fine paper, "Hume's Theory of Mental Activity," Philosophical Review, LXIX (1960), pp. 289-310.
4. This point was suggested to me by Norman Melchert and by Dan Crawford.