



### **Hume on Identity**

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## HUME ON IDENTITY

The analysis of identity which Hume presents in the Treatise of Human Nature is in large part a development out of the author's view of time and its relation to objects. Here I will attempt to trace through this analysis and to assess its cogency. I will try to show that Hume's view of time, and the doctrine of identity which stems from it, are largely independent of the author's representationalism and his impressions-ideas epistemology; I will also try to clarify the connection, or lack of connection, between Hume's general doctrine of identity and his remarks on personal identity near the end of Book I of the Treatise. Regarding the analysis of identity itself, I will argue that this account falls through because Hume bases it on a certain view of time, and then is forced to reject covertly this doctrine of time in his explanation of how we acquire the concept of identity.

There are some brief remarks about identity in Part III of Book I, where Hume lists identity as one of the seven kinds of philosophical relation, but this topic is not explored in any detail until Part IV. This serious treatment of identity, however, unlike the perfunctory remarks in Part III, draws heavily on the theory of space and time which is developed in Part II<sup>1</sup>, so it is this doctrine which we must first consider. Although it is not possible here to enter into a detailed analysis of Hume's arguments regarding space and time, we must have at least a brief look at them simply to see what Hume's view of space and time is, so that we may see how he applies this to identity. Hume's treatment of this topic falls into two main sections. First, he is concerned to show that any quantity of space or time must be composed of a finite number of indivisible parts. He then attempts to prove that these indivisible parts must be particular objects, and that space and time just are these objects in their different modes of arrangement or presentation.

Of his arguments against the infinite divisibility of space and time, one of them at least does not hinge at all on what I shall call Hume's representationalism, his view that we are directly aware only of our own mental contents, and that any knowledge of things other than these "perceptions" must be the result of an inference of some kind. This argument begins with the premise that

*. . .existence in itself belongs only to unity, and is never applicable to number, but on account of the unites, of which the number is composed. (T30)<sup>2</sup>*

If space and time were infinitely divisible, however, there would be no units, for any part of space or length of time which was chosen, however small, would be a complex composed of smaller parts. Thus if space and time were infinitely divisible, there would be no units of which they were composed, and thus space and time as aggregates of units could not exist either. So if space and time exist at all, they must be composed of indivisible parts.

Although Hume claims to have derived this "strong and beautiful" argument from a French philosopher named Malezieu, it could also be regarded as an application to space and time of Leibniz' argument in the Monadology that reality must consist of monads.<sup>3</sup> It would be interesting to know in this connection how familiar Hume (or Malezieu) was with the writings of Leibniz. At any rate, this is perhaps the most powerful argument of Part II, even though it is hardly original with Hume.

Having established to his satisfaction in the first two sections of Part II that space and time are composed of indivisible parts, Hume attempts in the third section to show that these parts must be objects, more specifically colored points, and that space and time simply are these points in two different modes of arrangement. Hume begins this argument by reminding the reader that every idea *first makes its appearance in a correspondent impression. (T33)*

He then asks from what impressions our ideas of space and time are derived. The idea of space, at any rate, cannot arise from internal impressions such as our passions and emotions, so it must be a copy of impressions which are received through the senses.

*But my senses convey to me only the impressions of color'd points, dispos'd in a certain manner... [Therefore] we may conclude with certainty, that the idea of extension is nothing but a copy of these color'd points, and of the manner of their appearance. (T34)*

The idea of time is derived not only from impressions of sensation, but from *perceptions of every kind, ideas as well as impressions, and impressions of reflection as well as of sensation. (T35)* All of these perceptions are presented to us in a certain manner, which we call succession. After arguing that we are unaware of any passage of time when we are unaware of a change in our perceptions, Hume concludes that

*. . . time cannot make its appearance to the mind, either alone, or attended with a steady unchangeable object, but is always discover'd by some perceivable succession of changeable objects. (T35)*

Having shown to his satisfaction that our idea of time is derived from a series of impressions of changeable (numerically distinct) objects, Hume inquires whether time can be conceived as anything distinct from such a series. This is, for Hume, to ask whether we can have an impression of time distinct from the impressions of individual objects in succession. Hume argues that the most cursory reflection on our experience is sufficient to show that we have no such separate impression. Five notes played on a flute, he says, give us the impression of time, although time is not a sixth impression alongside the impressions of the individual notes. Since there does not appear any *primary distinct impression* which is our impression of

time, time itself must be simply *different ideas, or impressions, or objects dispos'd in a certain manner, that is, succeeding each other.* (T37)

Hume's view of space and time is not inseparably linked with his doctrine that one is "directly aware" only of one's own impressions and ideas. What it is dependent upon is Hume's view that we cannot have an idea which is not derived from experience. We could paraphrase Hume's arguments to say that in our apprehension of space what we apprehend is ultimately only a number of colored points which are presented in a certain manner, and that therefore our conception of space can only be a conception of a number of points as so presented. Likewise, in our awareness of time we perceive nothing but a number of distinct items (external entities or internal mental states) in succession, so our idea of time is no more than a reflection of this succession of things. One could use Hume's "Leibnizian" argument about unity being logically prior to number to show that time and space cannot be infinitely divisible and thus must be composed of indivisible parts. Since the above arguments have, according to Hume, shown that we have no conception of either space or time apart from our ideas of the items which we say are in space and time, it follows that space and time are these items in their particular relations to one another. These ultimate objects, then, which need not be identified with perceptions of any sort, possess neither extension nor duration, since these latter are merely modes of arrangement of a plurality of the items which are the building blocks of Hume's universe.

In Part IV of Book I, Hume renews his examination of identity through an attempt to buttress his argument that it is the constancy and coherence of our perceptions which gives us a belief in the continuous existence of objects distinct from the mind. Among the things which are requisite to justify this system, Hume says, is an explan-

ation of the principium individuationis, or principle of identity. That is, we must explain what we mean when we predicate identity of an object, and we must account for how the mind comes to have this idea of numerical sameness. Hume begins his account by remarking that the view of a single object is not by itself sufficient to give us the idea of identity. Here Hume departs from what appears to be his view of identity in Part III, and argues that we do not say simply that an object is identical with itself.

*For in that proposition. . . if the idea express'd by the word, object, were no ways distinguish'd from that meant by itself; we really shou'd mean nothing. (T200)*

A single object, says Hume, conveys only the idea of unity, not that of identity. But a multiplicity of objects gives us only the idea of number. The idea of identity is neither that of unity nor that of number, but must somehow lie between these two ideas. To bridge this gap Hume brings in the notion of time. He notes that his previous analysis of time has shown that time is a succession of objects, so that

*. . . when we apply its idea to any unchangeable object, 'tis only by a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos'd to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects. (T200-201)*

Since this account of time has been presented as a piece of conceptual analysis, Hume cannot say simply that our idea of a single object persisting through time does not fit the real world. He must rather say that we do not have this idea at all, even though we appear to. The problem of identity then becomes, for Hume, that of explaining how it is that we seem to be able to think of a single, individual object lasting over an interval of time.

Hume's account of how we seem to have this idea is, basically, the same account which is given in his analysis

of time for how we seem to have the idea of time without a succession of objects. Hume says that when we consider a number of points of time (i.e. when we consider a number of objects in succession), we may consider them in two ways. First, we may consider them "at the very same instant," holding both an earlier and a later object together in the mind. In this case the earlier object which we consider *must be multiply'd, in order to be conceiv'd at once, as existent in these two different points of time.* (T201) What we are doing is to consider the earlier object twice over, so as to think of it while we are perceiving the second. This simultaneous consideration of two or more objects gives us the idea of number. As a second possibility, we may conceive of these instants of time, these objects, in the order in which they are presented,

*. . .and conceiving first one moment, along with the object then existent, imagine afterwards a change in the time without any variation or interruption in the object.* (T201)

What the mind is doing here is to focus its attention on the first object and to think of it as still existing, while also being aware of the flow of time, the succession of objects, "behind" it. Such an action of the mind gives us the idea of unity, since it is one object which the mind is apprehending, even though it is apprehending this single object "along with" first one and then another instant of time, i.e. one and then another object in succession. Thus one is conceiving of one object alongside of a number of objects in temporal series.

*Here then is an idea, which is a medium betwixt unity and number; or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it.* (T201)

Since the ideas both of unity and number are involved in our notion of identity, one could say equally well that our idea of identity is the idea of unity (that is, the idea of

a single object) as conceived against (or alongside of, or in comparison with) the idea of number in succession, or that it is the idea of number in succession seen against a background of a single object. It is this juxtaposition of ideas which the mind affects, when we say that *the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another*; (T201) and it is by this latter formulation of the concept of identity that when we say that an object is identical with itself, we can make a distinction between the meanings of "object" and "itself", *without going the length of number, and at the same time without restraining ourselves to a strict and absolute unity.* (T201) The principle of identity is thus *nothing but the invariableness and uninterruptedness of any object, thro' a suppos'd variation of time.* (T201)

In assessing this account, emphasis should be put upon the term "supposed" in the above passage. A single object does not truly persist through a duration of time, but only through a "supposed" duration; the reason why we seem to be able to conceive of one object actually persisting through a duration is the juxtaposition of ideas as described above. It is largely a verbal matter whether one wishes to say that we do not actually have the idea of identity, but rather only the ideas of unity and number-in-succession juxtaposed, or whether one says that we do have the idea of identity, which is merely those of unity and number-in-succession seen together. It is clear from Hume's arguments that he prefers the first formulation: that we describe our notion of identity as that of one object persisting through time, that it is only by a "fiction of the imagination" that we think we have this idea, and that therefore we really have no such thing as the idea of identity at all.

Hume's explanation of our bogus concept of identity is the same as his explanation of our fallacious belief that we have an idea of unchanging duration: The mind

conceives a single, unchanging object against a background of a number of objects in succession, and because of its tendency to confuse ideas it supposes that the unchanging object partakes of the temporal arrangement of the series. Where this account breaks down is in its lack of any explanation of the relationship between the one unchanging object and the succession of objects against which it is seen. In the account of the idea of time without a changeable existence, the unchanging object is said to be compared with the succession of perception, whereas in the account of identity the single object is conceived along with the succession. But what do these expressions mean here? By this point in the Treatise Hume has a very small stock of relations to work with, and it is difficult to see which one he can use. Spatial contiguity will not work, because for Hume a temporal succession can consist of "objects" of any sort, even those to which the notion of spatial contiguity cannot apply. That is, a succession of sounds, or smells, or emotions would do just as well to constitute time as would any other kind of succession. But if the "alongside of" in Hume's analysis does not mean spatial proximity, what does it mean?

None of the other kinds of relation which Hume recognizes in the Treatise seems any more promising. Hume never suggests that there is a causal relation between the single object and the series, nor will any of the four relations of knowledge (resemblance, proportion in quantity of number, degrees in any quality, and contrariety) suffice here to constitute this relationship of "comparison with." And at any rate, if Hume had had any of these other relations in mind he surely would have made this explicit. But if Hume does not intend to use either spatial contiguity, causation, or any of the four relations of knowledge here, he must mean that the one object is apprehended, or conceived of, at the same time as each of the members of the succession. This is pretty clearly what Hume does

mean, although he cannot make this explicit either to himself or his readers, for to say this is to say that there is one time which includes both the single object and the series. Whatever time is, if it is one "thing" or medium which includes both the single object and the series, surely it could include one without the other, in which case one object could endure alone through a period of time, the same period of time which would have been also taken up by the series. All of this implies that time cannot be simply the series itself in that mode of arrangement which is succession.

There remains only Hume's view of personal identity to be considered. Yet upon comparing his doctrine of identity per se to what is said in section #6 of Book IV (entitled "*Of Personal Identity*"), it seems that this latter section is not about identity at all as Hume understands it. When I look into my mind, Hume says, I am aware only of a succession of impressions and ideas of various sorts. Now if we stop Hume's analysis of inner experience at this point, it would seem that the only way in which the bogus relation of identity could even enter the picture here would be if there were some one object which was "seen against" the series of perceptions, and which was mistakenly thought to partake of the temporality of the series. But of course Hume is adamant in denying that there is any such single item which is seen alongside the series -- there is only the succession of perceptions itself.

Hume does go into some detail in attempting to find the link between these perceptions, which makes a person run them together in his awareness of them. He says that whenever a number of objects in succession are related by resemblance, contiguity, or cause and effect, the mind "passes easily" from considering one to considering another, so that the mental effort involved in considering the series is much like that involved in viewing a single object. My perceptions are in fact related by resemblance and cause and

effect, and so when I direct my inner gaze upon this succession of mental states the easy transition of my awareness from one of them to another creates the illusion that I am really viewing only a single object, and that therefore my mind is one thing instead of many.

The trouble with all of this is that according to Hume's own analysis, the consideration of a single object, or the consideration of many objects which are regarded as one, should give us only the idea of unity rather than that of identity. It would seem therefore that this section of the Treatise should have been entitled "Of Personal Unity." Yet Hume makes it very clear that what he is trying to explain is our conception of our own identity, our endurance as the same objects through time. I am reluctant to say that Hume was simply confused about what he was doing here, but I would be even more reluctant to attribute to him the view that there is some one inner object in addition to the series of perceptions which is regarded as identical because it is viewed against the temporal relation of the series. This additional thing would look too much like the Cartesian self which Hume is determined to avoid. The only Humean solution which I can see would be to say that the mind views the series of perceptions twice over, in that it considers it as one while also being aware of it as a number of things in succession. Only in this way could one attain that juxtaposition of ideas which would be necessary for a person to think of his mind as one thing which lasts through time, and hence for him to think of his own identity. I must confess, however, that I am unable to find this "Humean" solution in the text of the Treatise.

Whatever we should say about his treatment of personal identity, it is at least clear that Hume's attempt to account for our concept of identity, per se, and its relation to time, must be pronounced a failure. Because of his view of time, Hume must say that our common notion of identity is a mere fiction of the imagination. In his attempt to explain

how it is that we have this fiction, however, Hume is forced, in effect, to reject this view of time itself. That is, unless he is willing to recognize a new addition to his stock of relations, the relation of "alongside of" or "in comparison with," divested of all spatial connotations, he must see time as something which includes both the single (identical) object and the series. In this case, the view of time which underlies Hume's doctrine of identity turns out to be quite different from the view of time which is implied by it; in which case Hume's views both of identity and of time collapse together.

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1. This is evidence that the material in Book I does not appear in the order in which it was written. Hume may have written the sketch in Part III of the seven philosophical relations, and then during his writing on causation decided that he needed an account of space and time, and written the material which appears in Part II. This view of space and time was then used in developing the more sophisticated view of identity in Part IV.
2. D. Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, Selby-Bigge edition, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1888; reprinted 1967).
3. "And there must be simple substances, because there are compounds; for the compound is nothing but a collection or aggregatum of simples." Leibniz, Monadology in Leibniz Philosophical Writings, ed. G. H. R. Parkinson (London: J. M. Dent, 1973), p. 179. Leibniz would not have applied this to space and time, because it seemed obvious to him that any area of space or duration of time, however small, could be divided. This contributed to Leibniz' view that space and time are phenomena bene fundata.