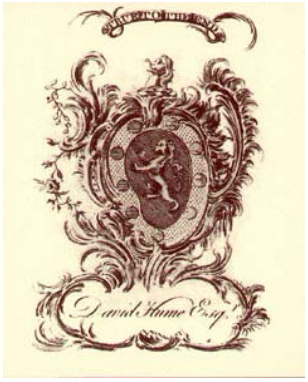

Self Inconsistency or Mere Perplexity?
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SELF INCONSISTENCY OR MERE SELF PERPLEXITY?

Professor McIntyre's imaginative and constructive paper has three primary parts (despite its division into six sections). First, she offers an interpretation of Hume's view of the self in Book I of the Treatise. Second, she explains why his own reservations in the Appendix create problems not only for this theory of self identity but for other parts of his philosophy as well. Finally, she tries to ease him out of these difficulties with her overlap interpretation of the bundle theory. My comments follow exactly this outline, though my conclusions, for the most part, do not coincide with hers. My reservations do not derive from her attempt to render Hume consistent. Rather, I question the foundations of the entire enterprise in which she, Robison, Nathanson, et. al. are engaged. That is, I remain unconvinced that the alleged problem, as presently framed, is more than a pseudo-problem.

I. Hume's Theory in Book I

In Book I Hume offers a variety of arguments about the nature of the self, most of which rely on other theories, such as those of causation, the association of ideas, and substance. Whatever the exact arguments and positions he may be advancing, at least the following six propositions are integral to his theory of personal identity:

1) The self is entirely reducible to a collection of perceptions.

2) The self is not characterized by strict identity.

3) There is nothing simple in which the collection of perceptions inheres.

4) Both identity and simplicity are attributed to the self because of relations between perceptions--the relations of causation and resemblance.

5) The relations of resemblance and causation unite these perceptions.

6) There are no real (non-associational) connections or relations among these perceptions which unite them.

Half of these six claims are critical denials of other philosophical claims; the other half are constructive philosophical theories. Hume's entire philosophical program in Book I is tied up with these claims. The criticisms are directed at numerous metaphysical theories of mind, substance and causation; and the constructive account of personal identity requires his theories of perception and association of ideas. I mention these obvious points only because it is so important to note that if the interpretation is correct which Professor McIntyre and others give to (roughly) five sentences in the Appendix, where Hume mentions a possible inconsistency, then Hume is not only questioning his theory of personal identity in Book I, he is calling Book I itself into question. To be convinced that this strikingly implausible turnabout occurs in five sentences of the Appendix, we must be given a most compelling argument--one which I doubt is forthcoming.

II. Hume's Alleged Inconsistency

The alleged problem of inconsistency arises because Hume says in the Appendix that he does not know how to render his own former opinions consistent (T633, 636). However, when he comes to a formal statement of the inconsistency, as everyone is agreed, the propositions said to be inconsistent are not inconsistent. In the attempt to grasp Hume's meaning, a general consensus has emerged in recent Hume scholarship, including Professor McIntyre in its company, that we ought both to move backward and forward a sentence or two in Hume's text. Hume says in those passages that his hopes for his theory are diminished because he is unable *to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness* (T636); and he then indicates that if perceptions could be shown to inhere in something simple or to be really connected, these prob-

lems would vanish. It is this textual setting which Robison, Nathanson, and Professor McIntyre turn into the claim that "the concept of a self which is affected by experience, and therefore must persist through experience--is precisely the concept of the self that cannot be accounted for in the context of the theory of merely associated ideas presented in the Treatise." And why not? Well, both because Hume's self seems to possess active agency (Robison,[1] or dispositions (Nathanson,[2]) in addition to perception-bundles and because the "explanation of belief [in a continually existing self] which Hume is committed to seems itself to presuppose a continually existing self. I take this to be the most plausible account of the inconsistency which Hume was alluding to in the Appendix" (McIntyre, italics added).

My problem with this interpretation, bluntly stated, is that it seems to rest on a bit of textual magic. Hume gives us not the slightest reason here or elsewhere to suppose that he sees a Hutchesonian-Kantian model textually in conflict with a Newtonian-Gravitational model of the self. He does not even hint at the milder thesis that he finds the custom model incomplete without appeal to a "more Kantian account of association" (McIntyre). Hume simply says that he cannot *explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions* (T636). The text seems to me straightforward: Hume is genuinely perplexed about how to provide a deeper explanation of the associative principles--resemblance and causation--which unite perceptions in consciousness. He sees, I would suppose, that it is hard to conceive how mere resemblance and causal connection between perceptions can account without philosophical perplexity for a "continuous" self which is distinct from experienced non-self entities. No theory gives Hume satisfaction. But far from saying that he finds a conflict in his theory between two competing theories, Hume expresses disenchantment with all theories known to him, his own included. At the very beginning of the Treatise, Hume warned us that the

causes of *the principles of union or cohesion among our simple ideas* (T12) are unknown, and so *must be resolv'd into original qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain* (T13), since the *ultimate causes of our mental actions* (T22) cannot be explained. Now, at the end of the Treatise, he seems only to be reiterating that problem, lamenting that he sees no way to further the exploration of the mind by providing a deeper causal explanation for these associative principles. [Early and late, Hume sees no way to provide a law-governed explanation of those associative principles, themselves casual laws, which are the cement of the mental (and physical) universe. In both cases Hume backs off from further speculation into such an obscure matter.]

It is one thing to criticize an interpretation, such as McIntyre's, on grounds that there is insufficient textual evidence. It is another matter to provide textual warrant for one's view that there is no textual warrant. Here is a stab in that direction: First, it is my belief that the recent notion that there is a Kantian faculty psychology replete with Kantian dispositions or categories in Hume's text has been largely spawned by the ingenuity of Robert Paul Wolff. Wolff has convinced a generation of Hume scholars of something for which they were not previously prepared: that we ought to look seriously for a Kantian apparatus in Hume. The demand is fair enough; we should look and see. But when I look I find only a Newtonian self.[1]

The McIntyre, et. al. view would be more plausible if it were shown that Hume's language of faculties and custom does genuinely presuppose a Kantian self. This would enhance their belief that Hume saw this flaw. But do Hume's views presuppose a synthesizing self? I see no reason why Hume cannot account reductionistically for all talk of faculties, propensities, and connections in terms of casual chains among perceptions. And this, of course, is precisely what Hume formally does attempt in the section on personal

identity. Mind is accounted for, in his reductionistic theory, as a collection of perceptions collected by certain relations. Far from incorporating Hutcheson's self, he explicitly eliminates all such accounts. Perhaps he cannot coherently reduce mental activities to perceptions, but I have yet to see an argument which shows that he cannot.

A second reason why my view seems preferable derives from what I take to be the obvious fact that Hume's discussion of the principles of causation and resemblance is poor and confusing in the section of Book I on personal identity. It is not clear what perception is casually linked to what perception, or exactly how resemblance fits in with the account of memory, which clearly is the most important mental faculty for Hume's account of personal identity. The text is also difficult to interpret because the actual roles of the principal principles are not well explicated. One fundamental problem is whether causation is to be understood as a natural or as a philosophical relation. He seems to say it is natural but to write as if it were philosophical, or perhaps both. [This fact may explain many of Robison's qualms about Hume's theory.[4]] It seems unsurprising, then, that in writing an Appendix, Hume looks at his work in dismay, and--without any further theory to offer--declares that he finds the whole problem too difficult for his understanding. After all, this problem has been too difficult for everyone's understanding.

There is a third reason for accepting my view. It is the one briefly mentioned in the first section: To take the opposition view is to hold that Hume is calling into question in five obscure sentences his entire set of philosophical conclusions in Book I--the whole of the theory of necessary connection, substance, association, etc. Almost any opposition interpretation seems preferable to this paradoxical one.

To conclude this section, I have argued that the whole enterprise of rendering Hume consistent because of

his own statement of an inconsistency is misconceived. Of course this finding says more about the motivation for Professor McIntyre's overlap theory than about the overlap theory itself, and I now turn to this final matter.

III. The Overlap Theory

Professor McIntyre's Overlap Theory is her most original contribution. [Ashley and Stack[5] seem to me to presuppose it but without arguing for it.] In introducing her theory, Professor McIntyre says that she is providing a "reconstruction" of Hume's view. If this term means she is providing a rational reconstruction which is faithful to the spirit but not necessarily to the law of the text, her effort may be judged both interesting and promising. [c.f. Nelson Pike[6] and also John Perry's Introduction to his anthology Personal Identity for (dissimilar) reconstruction attempts.] On the other hand, when she uses such locutions as "according to Hume" she indicates that she conceives her enterprise as that of pure textual analysis. I have some doubts that the text supports her interpretation to a greater extent than it supports a non-overlap interpretation. Hers seems at most more adequate as a way of extricating Hume from his alleged inconsistencies. But, while I prefer to regard her account as a rational reconstruction, I have no time here to delve into actual textual analysis in order to resolve this issue.

The more pressing problem is whether the overlap theory satisfactorily "resolves" Hume's problem. Professor McIntyre's contention is that "if past perceptions are not destroyed, the influence of perceptions from collections which no longer exist is in no way mysterious." This account does seem to help resolve Hume's problem of persistence through time, including memory persistence. [The underlying elements are the components of the underlying persistence.] However, I am unsure that memory perceptions cannot be explained by casual chains without overlap, as Hume often seems to think. But, setting that serious

problem aside, how does the McIntyre model facilitate reconciliation of the Newtonian and Hutchesonian models? Presumably Professor McIntyre is offering a mediating model which accounts for the two models allegedly in conflict in the Appendix. But for this controversy I cannot see that her Overlap Model significantly differs from the Newtonian Model. Consider an analogy to material substance. To hold the view that an object's unity and identity are constituted by underlying substratumless atoms i.e. units, some of which change now and then (as when a steel hinge rusts over a long period of time), is to hold Hume's professed view of substance, not a mediating view between his and a "real" substance theory (T16, 219 ff). So with the self, to hold that there are underlying substratumless perceptual atoms, some of which change now and then, is to hold Hume's Newtonian view of the self and in no way to hold a Hutchesonian or Kantian one. In short, whatever the virtues of the overlap vs. non-overlap theory [and, again, McIntyre's probably does help explain how memory persistence occurs], the overlap theory does not seem to have sufficient theoretical power to resolve the very inconsistency which it is tailored to resolve.

I should mention that I may have misunderstood Professor McIntyre on one point. Her mediating model may be intended only to show that there was no need for Hume to agonize over a conflict of models, since his original Newtonian model, properly understood, can handle faculty and custom talk, without reference to a Kantian model. If she has this conclusion in mind, my objection is inappropriate. But her paper does not read this way to me. In her Abstract of the paper she says "I then show that the theory that the self as a collection of perceptions, when properly interpreted, can be reconciled with the activities of the self required by Book I." It is the reconciliation part that seems bothersome. I should have thought anyone who takes Wolff's line or finds a Hutchesonian self would

see rejection, not reconciliation--and I too see no reconciliation.

Now if there is purely a Newtonian self in Book I and in the Appendix, then the alleged inconsistency deriving from two models of the self never arises; and there is no problem of inconsistency needing resolution. This outcome pleases me, since I think the Appendix relatively unimportant anyway. It ought also to please Professor McIntyre, as she too finds no inconsistency in Hume, despite her belief that he is attributing an inconsistency to himself which I do not find him confessing. And if she can see her way to agreeing with me that her contribution is that of providing a rational reconstruction of the text in an attempt to defend Hume, then I can come forward and congratulate her on her achievement.

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1. Wade L. Robison, "Hume on Personal Identity," Journal of the History of Philosophy, vol. XII (1974) p.192.

2. Stephen Nathanson, "Hume's Second Thoughts on the Self," Hume Studies, vol. II #1 (April 1976), p.41.

3. That Wolff is wrong and that there is nothing but a Newtonian self in Hume's work has recently been argued in a brilliant article by Fred Wilson (at the Hume Bicentennial Congress in Montreal). However, I want to sidestep those issues here. The main point is that McIntyre, et. al. argue that Hume sees a Hutchesonian-Kantian sort of self in his text. But not even Wolff makes the claim that Hume finds such a self; and certainly it is an extraordinary claim, since Hume's philosophical program is entirely Newtonian in character.

4. Robison, p. 186.

5. L. Ashley & M. Stack, "Hume's Theory of the Self and Its Identity," Dialogue, vol. XIII (L974), p. 252, including fn. #11.

6. Nelson Pike, "Hume's Bundle Theory of the Self: A Limited Defence," American Philosophical Quarterly, vol. 4 (1967) pp. 159-165.