



Further Remarks on the Consistency of Hume's Account of the Self

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FURTHER REMARKS ON THE CONSISTENCY
OF HUME'S ACCOUNT OF THE SELF

Philosophers no longer discuss Hume's account of the self solely in order to attack it. In separate comments prompted by my paper "Is Hume's Self Consistent?" Biro and Beauchamp join the camp of the defenders of Hume's view. As another member of this group, I share their desire to give a sympathetic interpretation of Hume's discussion of the self and personal identity. This general agreement notwithstanding, there are some substantial points concerning the nature of Hume's problems with his account of the self and his method of resolving them about which we do not agree. These disagreements will be the focal point of this paper. I wish to emphasize, however, that they occur within a broader framework of agreement that Hume's account of the self does not suffer from the defects that are so frequently attributed to it.

Discussions of personal identity frequently focus on the role played by memory in personal identity. The view that personal identity is based on memory (that is, that memory creates the connections between various sets of experiences that make them the experiences of one person) has been the subject of much criticism. Happily, it is no longer naively assumed that accounts of personal identity based on memory must be circular,¹ but the problems of developing an adequate account of personal identity based on memory are not minor ones. It is for this reason that I am uneasy about Biro's attempt to solve Hume's problems about personal identity by an appeal to the function of memory in personal identity. Biro contends that my reconstruction of the bundle theory of persons, which involves a partial overlap of non-identical bundles, is unnecessary. He argues that the intentionality of memory is sufficient to explain the connections that give a person the imperfect identity that it possesses through time. But I believe that Biro is

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mistaken, and that considerations of a basic sort about the relationship between memory and personal identity suggest that a non-circular Humean account of personal identity based on memory would not be possible apart from my reconstruction of the bundle theory, or something like it. I will begin by presenting this argument, after which I will clarify some points about my own view. However, I must immediately point out, as Biro does not, that Biro is not in disagreement with me when he argues for the view that Hume's theory of the self can be made consistent without going beyond the view that the self is a bundle of perceptions. We agree that Hume's apparent references to a "non-Newtonian" type of association are not basic, and can be eliminated. We disagree on the question of how this can be done.

Biro states,

It is memory, or, to be more specific, the presence of memory perceptions among the series of collections of perceptions, that, on Hume's view, is the mind or self, which makes it possible for such a series to be a self, a single entity which can be individuated and of which I can be aware.

and,

The intentionality of memories (as well as that of anticipations) is, I have argued, just the bond required for cementing perceptions without the aid of an additional agency such as a mind whose perceptions, on the alternative model, they would be said to be.

On Biro's account, therefore, memory, in virtue of its intentionality, creates a self out of distinct perceptions. Memories point to, (or represent, or refer to) impressions of past events, creating a bond between the bundle in which the memory occurs and the bundle in which the original impression occurred. No further link is necessary, and my "overlap theory" (as Biro calls it) is at best redundant. What problems would arise for Hume, if this were his view?

Accounts of personal identity based on memory face

the following difficulty. If we restrict the term 'memory' to a person's representations of his past experiences, then memory presupposes personal identity and an account of personal identity based on memory would be circular. It might be suggested that memory involves a weaker relationship-- say, the representation of experiences as if they were part of one's own past. But then the view that personal identity is based on memory is undermined in a different way. If this weak notion of memory is the one being appealed to in memory-based accounts of personal identity, then the person who seems to remember e.g., his surrendering to Grant at Appomattox is General Lee. For, on this weak interpretation of memory, the distinction between what someone really remembers, and what he only seems to remember, collapses. Apparently, the advocate of the view that personal identity is based on memory must either beg the question or sanction a wider class of judgments about identity through time than is compatible with our ordinary understanding of personal identity.

There is a way out of this dilemma. As we can see, only those memory-like experiences which are veridical should be relevant to personal identity. The problem is to find a non-question-begging characterization of veridical memory. This can be achieved if veridical memory is defined as those representations of past experience which have a special causal connection with the occurrence of the past experience.² This enables the defender of the memory-based account of personal identity to distinguish memories from "pseudo-memories" without the illicit appeal to personal identity.

In the light of this discussion we can see that certain difficulties for Hume emerge if Biro's account of his theory is correct. Biro claims that it is the intentionality of memory that cements perceptions together. But false memory-like experiences are also intentional. They too represent past experiences. If intentionality alone is

sufficient to establish connections between collections of perceptions existing at different times both memories and pseudo-memories will create such connections, and there would be no basis for saying that a person can seem to remember something which he did not do. This would be an unfortunate consequence.

Biro gets himself into this problem by speaking of "the presence of memory perceptions among the series of collections of perceptions that is the mind" as the feature that makes it possible for such a series to be a self. He tacitly starts with a series and looks for connecting links. But he fails to see that the links he finds, the links of intentionality, would also be links to collections of perceptions that are not in the series. Therefore, he has not explained the nature of the connection that unifies the perceptions into a series. It is only because memories are causally as well as intentionally related to past experiences that memory creates "a single individual which can be individuated". Can Biro overcome this problem by distinguishing memories from pseudo-memories by appealing to the differences in their causal antecedents, as suggested above? Of course he can--but to do this, as I will now show, requires the acceptance of the model of Hume's theory of the self that I argued for.

According to Hume, events which are causally related must be contiguous. If memories are to be distinguished from pseudo-memories by their causes, therefore, it must be the case that true memory impressions and the experiences they represent are contiguous. This poses no problem if the memory impression is formed at the time of the experience it represents and persists through time, through non-identical collections of perceptions. But to accept this account of the causal aspect of memory is tantamount to accepting my reconstruction of Hume's bundle theory of the self.³

Biro's defense of Hume emphasizes the role of

memory in personal identity. But unless memory has a connection to the past which is more than intentional Hume would face the well known problems of the memory-based account of personal identity. Furthermore, in order to incorporate the important causal aspect of memory into a Humean account of the self, Biro would need to appeal to the very model of Hume's theory of the self which I have defended and which he deems unnecessary.

Biro raises a different objection to my analysis by claiming that it is inadequate to explain imaginative activity. Biro holds that the account that I have given of Hume's theory of the self does not in fact help to make sense of Hume's claim that the mind forms habits on the basis of past experience. He argues that even if the collections of perceptions which constitute the self are parts of an overlapping series of collections of perceptions, so long as the self is strictly non-identical through time we would still have the puzzle of whose habit it is. However, Biro misconstrues the problem. The crucial question, as I see it, concerns whether Hume is entitled to appeal to the force of custom or repeated experience at all. In the strict sense, the self is not identical through time. The bundle of perceptions constituting an individual now is distinct from each of the bundles of perceptions constituting its past. The question is, how can a presently existing bundle, which strictly speaking has no past, form habits, or associate ideas, on the basis of past experience. Hume's theory must account for the fact that experience is cumulative--a fact that Hume presupposes in his theory of imaginative activity--without giving up the strict non-identity of the self through time. My account of Hume's theory does explain this, for on my account the cumulative character of experience is one of the factors responsible for the strict non-identity of the self through time. New perceptions destroy the identity of the collections to which they are added, and thus the self to which they are

added. Yet the destruction of the collection, as I argued in my earlier paper, masks the underlying identity of at least some of the constituent perceptions. The self is a series of collections of perceptions, related to each other by successive additions and deletions. Given this account, the Humean view that the self is a collection of perceptions, and not strictly identical through time, is compatible with the view that the self is capable of being effected by continuing experience. Hume's theory of imaginative activity does not, therefore, commit him to the existence of a Hutchesonian self observing perceptions, as his language so often strongly suggests.

A few comments in reply to Beauchamp are in order here, for it is precisely on this point that he has more seriously misunderstood me. I have not argued that Hume is committed to the Hutchesonian view of the self. I do hold, however, that the appeal to dispositions and the like poses a serious problem for the view that the self is a bundle of perceptions. Hume is committed to the view that experience is cumulative. My analysis makes it possible to show that the "Newtonian" view of the self is compatible with this commitment, and for that reason that Hume's theory of the self is consistent.

In conclusion, it can be noted that Biro and Beauchamp share a common element in their defense of Hume and their criticism of my account of Hume's theory of the self. They hold that my reconstruction of Hume's theory is otiose because they deny that there is even the appearance of a conflict between the role of the self throughout Book I of the Treatise and Hume's explicit account of the self. I have argued that these two aspects of Hume's theory can be reconciled, and that therefore Hume's account of the self can be defended against the charge of inconsistency. Other interpretations of Hume's theory may ultimately prove more fruitful than mine. But I do not think that Hume can be

successfully defended unless one is willing to recognize, and come to grips with, the apparent inconsistencies in his views.

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1. See, for example, John Perry, "Personal Identity, Memory, and the Problem of Circularity" in Personal Identity, edited by John Perry (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975), pp. 135-55.
2. It is beyond the scope of this paper to analyze the nature of this causal connection. However, so long as tracing this causal connection does not necessarily involve tracing the history of a human body the charge of circularity can be avoided.
3. An effect may fail to be contiguous with its cause if they are connected by a chain of causes and effects. It does not seem to me that it would be of much use to Biro to interpret the causal connection between memory and past experience in this way. To play a role in personal identity, memories must have a connection to past experience that is more than intentional. Biro may reject the view that presently existing memory impressions were directly contiguous with the experiences they represent (that is, that they are "holdovers" from past collections of perceptions). But if his defense of Hume is to be successful he must provide some non-intentional connection between memories and the past. My reconstruction of Hume can be adapted to explain an indirect connection between memory and the past. One way to do this might be to say that a present memory impression has the appropriate causal connection to a past experience if the memory occurs in a collection of perceptions derived by a series of additions and deletions from the collection in which the impressions of the experience originally occurred. The memory and the past experience are not directly contiguous, but they occur as parts of a related series, and the connecting bonds in this series can be specified independently of the intentional character of memory.