



Hume on Identity

Wan-Chuan Fang

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HUME ON IDENTITY

It is well-known that Hume has a quite unusual theory of personal identity. For him, personal identity is but the identity of mind. But to him mind is just a bundle of perceptions which keeps changing its constituent members; hence a mind is not something constant. In other places he also argues that mind is not a substance which unites all the perceptions which a person may have. His conclusion is that cases of personal identity for ordinary people are not genuine cases of identity for him at all. This probably is a direct consequence of his unusual notion of identity. My concern then is to see what Hume takes identity to be as an idea and as a relation.

The idea of identity, according to Hume, is an idea *betwixt unity and number*. (T 201)¹ So I want to see first how the ideas of number and unity originate.

Hume says that:

a single object, plac'd before us, and survey'd for any time without our discovering in it any interruption or variation, is able to give us a notion of identity. For when we consider any two points of this time, we may place them in different lights: We may either survey them at the very same instant; in which case they give us the idea of number, both by themselves and by the object; which must be multiply'd, in order to be conceiv'd at once, as existent in these two different points of time. (T 201)²

What is surveyed is a single object, i.e., an object which is neither interrupted nor varied. According to Price, "At this stage of [Hume's] inquiry, he ought only to be talking of sense-impressions ('perceptions')," so, here instead of talking about a single object, I shall talk about a single perception, i.e., an uninterrupted, unchanged perception which persists through a certain period of time. Roughly speaking, a perception is interrupted if it is not temporally

continuous; it is varied, if it changes either its sensible qualities, or its spatial characteristics, viz., shape, size, pattern.³ But what is a single perception which is uninterrupted and unchanged? This question as stated is misleading, for it suggests that there may be a single though interrupted or varied perception. The question I am now asking is the question of individuating perceptions. It is clear that for Hume the principle of individuation of perceptions is their invariableness and uninterruptedness through a supposed variation of time. (T 201) Hence there would be no such thing as a single but interrupted or varied perception.

Since Hume gives us no example of an uninterrupted and unchanged perception, let us choose an example for ourselves. Suppose we have nothing but twelve eggs in front of us, and suppose that the eggs and their immediate environment do not change during a certain period of time. Then the perception we have of these twelve eggs during this period of time would be an uninterrupted and unchanged perception. Let P be this perception.⁴

What Hume wants to do is to consider two points of time t_1 and t_2 in this period. Let P_1 and P_2 be the perceptions we have of the twelve eggs at t_1 and t_2 , respectively. P_1 and P_2 are then two stages of the perception P . Since P is uninterrupted and unchanged, its 'content' at each point of time during this period should remain the same. As Hume puts it, we suppose the change to lie only in ... time (T 203); and the change in time, when applied to an unchangeable⁵ 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, and in particular of that of our perceptions. (T 200-201) We now are told to survey P_1 and P_2 at once. But this can only be done at a time t_3 which is

later than both t_1 and t_2 . How can we survey them after t_1 and t_2 ? Presumably by memory we may recall P_1 and P_2 at t_3 . Now Hume tells us that this survey gives us the idea of number, of multiplicity. (Cf. T 201) Hume also says that a *multiplicity of objects can never convey this idea [of identity] The mind ... considers them as forming two, three, or any determinate number of objects...* (T 200) In the next paragraph immediately following the above quotation, Hume seems to identify this as the idea of number. So it seems that there are two ways for Hume to get the idea of number, one by taking the stages of a single perception, another by perceiving a multiplicity of objects. This will be further discussed later.

Now let us see how the idea of unity arises. What I am quoting in the following immediately follows my first long quotation on page 1 of the present article. We are still supposed to be talking about ways of surveying the two stages P_1 and P_2 of P . Now Hume says that there is another way of surveying the perceptions P_1 and P_2 . What he says is this:

Or on the other hand, we may trace the succession of time by a like succession of ideas, 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; in which case it gives us the idea of unity. (T 201)

From what he says here, Hume seems to have forgotten P_1 and P_2 . For he is here talking about a succession of ideas, rather than P_1 and P_2 . The gist of what he says here is this. we have an uninterrupted and unchanged perception of P . We may survey P throughout the period of its existence, and at each point of time during this period, the mind surveys what is existent at that point of time. The mind now surveys different stages of P not at once, but in a successive fashion. Such a survey gives us the idea of unity.

It is now time to consider the origin of the idea of identity. Several relevant passages from Hume are quoted as follows:

- (1) *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. And this is the idea which we call that of identity. (T 201)*
- (2) *We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time; and this idea we call that of identity or sameness. (T 253)*
- (3) *Thus the principle of individuation is nothing but the invariableness and uninterruptedness of any object, thro' a suppos'd variation of time, by which the mind can trace it in the different periods of its existence, without any break of the view, and without being oblig'd to form the idea of multiplicity or number. (T 201)*

Both (1) and (3) indicate that the idea of identity is the idea of something which is in some sense common to both the idea of unity and the idea of number. In (2) Hume clearly identifies the idea of identity as the idea of an object, 'that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time. The perception P is indeed something common to the idea of unity and the idea of number, for through different ways of surveying P, it can give both the idea of unity and the idea of number. But P is a common factor of the ideas of unity and number only because the latter two ideas originate from two different surveys of P.

Now suppose that we have an uninterrupted and unchanged perception of an object, e.g., a particular cup. From what we have said before, this perception can give us either the idea of number or the idea of unity, depending on the ways we survey it. But on the

other hand, we have seen that the uninterrupted and unchanged perception of our twelve eggs can also give us either the idea of number or unity. So it follows that the idea of either number or unity which we may get from an uninterrupted, unchanged perception has nothing to do with the number of objects of which we have the uninterrupted and unchanged perception in question.

This last point also indicates that there is something strange about Hume's principle of identity or principium individuationis. (Cf. T 199-200) According to this principle, the way to individuate a perception is to take only the uninterrupted and unchanged part of perceptions as individual perceptions to which we *must attribute a perfect identity*.... (T 255)⁶ For instance, if we see the traffic light which goes from green to yellow, then the perception of green and (then) yellow light is not to be individuated as a single perception which has perfect identity. Or to speak in ordinary, everyday terms, if a man changes his posture from standing to sitting, then the standing man is pronounced to be different from the sitting man. I think that it is due to his principle of individuation (identity) that Hume rejects many cases which we would take to be cases of identity as not cases of identity in his sense.

Hume's principle of individuation also implies that many ordinary individual things are not individuals in Hume's sense.⁷ It would also imply that many things which this principle recognizes as individuals are not everyday individuals. Take, for instance, two pieces of paper, and one pen. Assume that we have an uninterrupted and invaried perception of all and only the things just mentioned. Then according to the principle of individuation or identity, it would be a single perception with perfect identity. But we would

not normally take the whole which consists of the things mentioned as a single object, though we no doubt would take the pen, or each piece of paper as individual objects. What I am saying is that Hume's notion of identity, as shown here and amply shown by Penelhum,⁸ does not reflect the way we understand the notion of identity.

Hume's notion of identity no doubt determines his notion of identity as a relation. Let us see what kind of relation identity is.

A convenient way to approach this question is to take the standard first-order theory of identity as a model and then compare it with Hume's notion of identity. The identity relation in first-order logic is determined by the following axioms:

$$(a) \quad x = x;$$

$$(b) \quad x = y \rightarrow (Fx \rightarrow Fy).$$

(b) is called the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals; in words, it says that if x and y are identical, then what is true of x is also true of y . In view of our previous discussion, it should be no surprise that Hume's notion of identity as a relation does not meet both (a) and (b). Clearly, (a) is not fulfilled by Hume's notion of identity. This is supported by the following:

For in that proposition, an object is the same with itself, 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... (T 200)

The reason why (a) is violated is roughly this. In (a) both occurrences of 'x' refer to exactly the same thing. But according to Hume, this makes no sense. We cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that an object is the same with itself, says Hume, unless we mean, that the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another. (T 201) That is, for Hume, it only makes sense

to say that $x = y$ when both x and y are two different stages of the same uninterrupted and unchanged perception or object. To distinguish Hume's special relation of identity from the usual one, let us use ' $=*$ ' for the former, and keep '=' for the latter. Now suppose A is a certain uninterrupted and unchanged perception which exists during a certain period of time, and let a and b be two different stages of A . Then ' $a =* b$ ' can be defined as follows:

(c) $a =* b$ if and only if a and b are stages of A .

But suppose we want to say simply that $a =* b$ without referring to any particular uninterrupted and unchanged perception, then we have to define ' $a =* b$ ' as follows:

(d) $a =* b$ if and only if there is some X such that a and b are stages of X . (' X ' here ranges over uninterrupted and unchanged perceptions.)

It is important to note that a and b in the above are two different stages of a certain perception. If this is ignored, then if we take, say, A in (c) and regard it as a stage of itself, then we can get the conclusion that $A =* A$ from (c). This is of course contrary to Hume's contention. In order to bring out the fact that a should be different from b , (c) and (d) should be revised, respectively as follows:

(c') $a =* b$ if and only if a and b are different stages of A .

(d') $a =* b$ if and only if there is some X such that a and b are different stages of X .

But what does the word 'different' in (c') and (d') mean? Clearly, it cannot mean the opposite of the relation $=*$; otherwise, both (c') and (d') would involve infinite regress, and hence we would have no (acceptable) definition for the relation $=*$. I believe that the word 'different' should be taken as the opposite of the relation $=$. But then Hume is presupposing the usual identity relation after all.

And if so, then he has no right to reject ordinary cases of identity.

It should be noted that the relation $=^*$ is not defined for perceptions like A. But if he really presupposes the relation $=$, then he has no right to say that it makes no sense to say that A is identical with itself. I suspect that the relation $=$ can only be defined in terms of the relation $=^*$, and hence Hume is in some real trouble.

Let us now see how the principle of the indiscernibility of identicals is violated by Hume's notion of identity. But first let me explain what I mean by 'violation' here. I said before that Hume's notion of identity violates Axiom (a). By this I mean the following three things: ' $A = A$ ' does not hold, ' $A =^* A$ ' does not hold, ' $a =^* a$ ' does not hold. But when I say that Hume's notion of identity violates the Axiom (b), I mean that ' $x =^* y \rightarrow (Fx \rightarrow Fy)$ ' is violated. For instance, in ' $a =^* b \rightarrow (Fa \rightarrow Fb)$ ', the antecedent is true, according to the way we specified a and b. But since a and b are two different stages of A, it is easy to see that some F can be true of a while false of b. In ' $A = A \rightarrow (F_A \rightarrow F_A)$ ', the antecedent, according to Hume, makes no sense, and hence the truth value of the whole sentence is not immediately clear, barring a theory which deals with sentences which may lack truth value. It is for this reason that I do not say Axiom (b) itself is violated. So to be accurate, we should not say that (b) is violated; instead, we should say that ' $x =^* y \rightarrow (Fx \rightarrow Fy)$ ' is violated. But Axiom (b) is also violated in the sense that ' $A = A \rightarrow (F_A \rightarrow F_A)$ ' is clearly true to us; but for Hume, it may either have no truth value, or be false, depending on how he would deal with sentences which 'make no sense.'

We can now see that Hume has a very different notion of the relation of identity. This difference may account for his unusual theory of personal identity and the identity of other kinds of entities. The question is: Does Hume have good reason to prefer his unusual notion of identity to that of the more familiar one? We know that his notion does not accord with our everyday linguistic practice. This alone hardly constitutes a fatal flaw. I suspect that if it turns out to be the case that his relation of identity =* can only be understood or defined with the help of the relation =, then not only has he no reason for preferring the relation =*, he also has no reason to attack the relation =, as he often does by way of rejecting those identity claims which ordinary people make all the time.⁹

Wan-Chuan Fang
University of California, Irvine

1. 'T' will refer to David Hume's A Treatise of Human Nature, (ed.) L.A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford. The numerals which follow 'T' refer to page numbers in T.
2. H.H. Price, Hume's Theory of the External World (Oxford University Press, 1940) p. 46.
3. My explanation of 'interruptedness' and 'variableness' is different from that of Price. (Cf. Price, ibid., p. 22) Price's definition of 'interruptedness' is strong enough to cover the notion of 'variableness'. Price regards sensible context as one of the spatial characteristics of perceptions. (Cf. Price p. 22) I disagree with this. For according to Hume, the change of the sensible context of a perception will not count as a change of the perception itself. (Cf. T 201)
4. P is here the whole perception which persists through time.

5. The word 'unchangeable' is used by Hume. Price (ibid., p. 45) thinks that it is equivalent to 'unchanging'. I agree with him.
6. I think that if a perception has perfect identity, then any two different stages of perception would be identical in Hume's sense. This will be discussed later.
7. There is a sense in which one may say that our ordinary individual things are indeed individuals in Hume's sense. If Hume takes ordinary individual things as logical constructs out of their stages, then they are, or at least are analogous to, our ordinary individuals. (For this, cf. Ashley and Stack, "Hume's Theory of the Self and its Identity," Dialogue (June 1974), p. 251.) But this is not the sense in which I say that ordinary individual things are not individual things in Hume's sense.
8. See his "Hume on Personal Identity" in Philosophical Review, LXIV (1955).
9. I am grateful to an anonymous reviewer for pointing out a textual error; I would also want to thank the same reviewer for other comments.