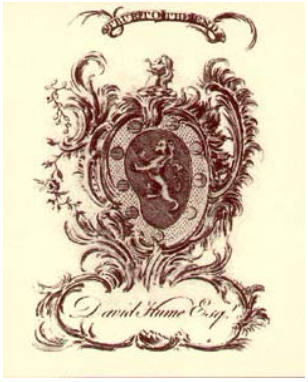

Hume on Perceptions and Persons
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HUME ON PERCEPTIONS AND PERSONS

Hume's account of personal identity,[1] though defective by his own lights as an answer to the questions he frames, is not as wildly unacceptable as many readers have supposed. An indication of its power and a feature that many recent readers have missed is that Hume can cite any bit of data which we could in the course of trying to ascertain the identity of a person. Now, it seems pretty evident that facts about the body of a person are relevant to a determination of identity or "oneness" of that person. It is not commonly recognized that such facts are fully available to the would-be Knower within Hume's perspective.

It is possible, I surmise, that twentieth century readers have been misled in their reading of Hume by their own assumptions about "mind" and "mental objects;" there may be some assumptions which we take for granted, but which Hume would not accept. Below I will offer some brief speculations about this matter, though it is not my main concern. Mainly I want to show that Hume's persons can have bodies.

First I will present what I take to be the standard way of reading Hume's account of personal identity nowadays. Next I will show that a careful reading of the Treatise supports my claim that Hume's perspective does not rule out as inadmissible data concerning the physical aspect of being a person. Our problem here is to determine what perceptions are for Hume. Finally I will illustrate the effect my view has when it comes to understanding what a person is.

I. The Standard View

Let me sketch "the person" whose identity we are to investigate, according to the standard way of reading Hume when we take up the topic of personal

identity. I shall use for my sketch several works by Terence Penelhum.[2] Penelhum's view of the matter is widely accepted, typical, and it has the virtue of being clear and explicit on the topic which concerns us.

We may conveniently begin by recalling the way in which Hume attacked those philosophers who hold that each of us is intimately conscious of our self and is certain of its "perfect identity and simplicity." Against this claim Hume reported that his own introspection never reveals anything but "some particular perception or other." (T 252) He concludes from this that a person is "... nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions." His problem, of course, is that we do not ordinarily think of a person as being nothing but a bundle or collection of anything, much less one constituted by perceptions. It strikes us that a person has greater unity, and a different kind of unity, than any bundle or mere collection would have. Hume proceeds to construct an explanation of why we have "so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possest of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives." (T 253) The explanation Hume offers in the subsequent discussion is not our present concern; briefly, his view is that "in our common way of thinking" we confuse two ideas. One is that of an object that remains the same over some period of time (the idea of identity) and the other is that of several related objects existing in succession (the idea of diversity). It happens that distinct things can blend together for the human mind, provided that the things are sufficiently alike. The imagination passes smoothly over the differences and it feels the same to

us as one thing does. So the identity we are talking about is really "fictitious."

Having glanced at the explanation Hume offers, let us go back for a moment to the question which calls for the explanation in the first place. Regarding the character of Hume's question, Penelhum makes the following observation.

> ...the question [which Hume asks about personal identity] ... is importantly restricted. It is a question about our ascription of unity to a succession of perceptions; i.e. it is about what we call a mind, rather than what we call a person. The latter, at least in common speech, is a psychophysical entity, whereas the former consists exclusively of psychical components. (Dialogue 398)

Penelhum goes on to suggest that Hume's restriction is a deeply damaging one. He goes so far as to say, "Perhaps Hume's puzzle comes from subtracting the body from the concept of a person and still expecting the mental phenomena that remain to exhibit the same stability that the body gives to the psychophysical person." In making these remarks, Penelhum clearly assumes that for Hume perceptions are mental things, that they are to be contrasted with the other big category of things, the physical. He is certainly not alone in endorsing such a view. For instance, Antony Flew writes:

> ...Impressions are defined as constituting with ideas the class of 'perceptions of the mind.' While wine must be (logically) public, the impression of wine like the idea of wine must be (logically) private. Whereas the presence of wine tautologically guarantees the presence of wine, the occurrence of an impression of wine is by no means a sufficient condition of the presence of wine -- because an impression of wine, but not of course real wine, may be hallucinatory. Impressions belong to

> the category of experiences: wine is cellared in that of physical things.[3]

This stance regarding the nature of perceptions yields what I am terming "the standard way" of reading Hume's account of personal identity. In the requirement that we find the identity of persons in various series of perceptions, these perceptions being purely mental experiences, Hume has effectively legislated that person is a mental concept. Now that is a surprising bit of legislation for a philosopher to make, since we ordinarily think of ourselves as flesh and blood creatures. Of course we have states of consciousness as well. It remains true that we normally identify people, in a wide variety of contexts, by making reference to their physical being. We can recognize (the identity of) some people just by hearing their voice, or by seeing their profile. The police use fingerprints, eye color, and scars. So Hume has given himself a handicap -- the standard view would hold -- which shifts the inquiry away from the most common and familiar criteria for personal identity. One direct result of adopting this handicap may be that Hume proceeds to investigate, not the identity of a person, but the quite different matter of the identity of a person's mind. Thus Penelhum suggests that we should

> ...see how his Section looks as an account of whatever sort of unity the mind of a person exhibits, rather than an account of the sort of unity that a person exhibits. If we read him like this, it is a mind that is nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions; and it is the status of our alleged belief in its unity that Hume is examining. (Dialogue 398-399, Penelhum's emphasis)

It may be doubted whether this move much improves Hume's position, since the problem remains the

paradoxical one of finding unity among discrete and diverse objects. In any case, we have taken a needless wrong turn at this juncture. We have been misled by the proposition that perceptions are mental in nature.

II. Hume's Perceptions

"All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call IMPRESSIONS and IDEAS." (T 1) This assertion, with which Hume begins his Treatise, is highly misleading. It invites a question which ought to be suppressed and discouraged. The question is, what implicit contrast is being drawn in the first few words of the sentence? What things are not perceptions? Or, what seems more jarring, what perceptions are not "of the human mind?" As we have seen, some of Hume's readers have been ready to supply a direct answer to these questions, an answer which is in accordance with familiar ideas about body and mind. Mind and body are the two ultimate divisions in reality; mind is 'private' and body is 'public.' The discussion of impressions and ideas will plainly concern the private part of existence.

Against this popular way of reading the text, I wish to say that the best and most correct answer to the question, "What is to be contrasted with perceptions?" is: There is no contrast. There are no things which are not perceptions. There are no perceptions which are not objects of the human mind.

This assertion may strike some readers as ridiculous and paradoxical. How can a word be meaningful if it does not serve to mark some contrast in the world? I will turn to this problem below; for now it may prove helpful to add a rider to my assertion about perceptions. The rider is: as far as we know. So the claim would be, if there are things which are not perceptions, or if there are perceptions which are not

of the human mind, these things are completely unknown to us. They lie outside our ken. And where the topic is our understanding, as it is in Book I of the Treatise, it is appropriate to ignore such things and stay within the field of perceptions. These are the things we know.

Are the things we know, our perceptions, knowable only to one? Are perceptions private? In the context of our Cartesian heritage, it is a moot question. If we had to answer the question in Hume's behalf, at least provisionally I think we should say that some perceptions are private and some are not.[4] Which are which can become a nice question in real life as well as in philosophy; we have all had the experience of being misunderstood when we thought our perceptions had been shared with others. Anyhow, if I am right, the distinction between private-mental-stuff and public-physical-stuff is not in the foreground at the beginning of Book I, though it may turn out to be in the background or behind the woodwork. Hume is merely opening the topic of our understanding, and that is the topic of what goes on in the human mind. To know something is to have it in mind, or at least to be able to bring it to mind on demand. To be an "object of mind" is merely to be available to us, given the ways we are saddled by nature with particular capacities as Knowers. To be an object of mind is not to be one particular kind of substance rather than some other; it is not to be a mental thing rather than a physical thing.

We now have before us two contrasting views of Hume's perceptions: the standard view, which holds that perceptions are mental and private, and my own view, which is that perceptions are the things we know, both private and public. Which view is better supported by the text?

Here is one passage which might strike a neutral party as providing definite support for my own view of perceptions. Hume reports that "the vulgar," which is to say, "the generality of mankind," do not operate with any contrast between their perceptions and the objects perceived. "Those very sensations, which enter by the eye or ear, are with them the true objects..." (T 202) In order to represent the common man's understanding, Hume resolves to suppose:

> ...that there is only a single existence, which I shall call indifferently object or perception, according as it shall seem best to suit my purpose, understanding by both of them what any common man means by a hat, or shoe, or stone, or any other impression, convey'd to him by his senses. (T 202)

Of course it cannot be assumed that Hume endorses this common perspective. In fact it seems clear that in Book I the vulgar view is not his view. The trouble is that the vulgar believe that perceptions continue to exist even when they are no longer perceived. Hume thinks we cannot believe that and believe that perceptions are the only objects that exist. Now, I am not convinced that Hume has got our ordinary beliefs about objects properly represented,[5] but let that pass. It is enough to note that Hume concludes that the common man's understanding can be preserved only by distinguishing between perceptions and objects which have an existence apart from the mind.

The catch in this picture of dual existences is simply that we are stuck on one side of the dichotomy. "...'tis impossible for us so much as to conceive or form an idea of any thing specifically different from ideas and impressions." (T 67) Again, in a slightly fuller statement, Hume insists

> ...'tis impossible our idea of a perception, and that of an object or

> external existence can ever represent what are specifically different from each other. Whatever difference we may suppose betwixt them, 'tis still incomprehensible to us; and we are oblig'd either to conceive an external object merely as a relation without a relative, or to make it the very same with a perception or impression. (T 241)

We cannot say that an external object is similar to our perceptions, or that it is different, because we can never compare them. This is tantamount to saying that the idea of an external object is absolutely devoid of content.

I would conclude that the idea of an external object should be distinguished from the ideas we have of physical objects. If we can make out a distinction between physical objects and mental objects at all, it will have to be accomplished within the arena of perceptions. This is necessary if the distinction is to have any content whatever in our understanding.

What textual considerations support the standard view, that perceptions are mental things?

One putative support may reside in the belief, which Hume surely had, that a word has to stand for or mark off some contrast, some difference in the world, if it is to be a meaningful word. Therefore the word "perceptions" has to be contrasted with something. Thus one might argue in behalf of the standard view.

Here we might try to meet the point by observing that a certain contrast <u>is</u> introduced by Hume, with the term "external object" or "external existence." The contrast is a strange one, of course, because one side of it turns out to be empty. (This is also the situation with Kant's contrast of <u>phenomena</u> and <u>noumena</u>.) Instead of proceeding with this line let us consider whether we can be sure that all words, or

all words which refer to something, must mark some contrast if they are to be meaningful.

Take the word everything. If that word refers to anything, apart from particular contexts, it must refer to everything at once. Of course many times it is clear from the context that the scope of the word's reference is limited in some way. When men from the moving company come to the house with their van and I instruct them, "Be sure to take everything," it is understood that I mean everything in the house, or rather, everything which is not a fixture or otherwise a permanent part of the house. When I use the word everything in this context I do not mean to refer to the faucets on the kitchen sink. Do we ever use the word everything to refer to everything at once (whatever that means)? Suppose a student asks, "How much of the world did Thales hope to explain with his pronouncement about water?" The professor replies, "He thought he could explain everything." In this context the word "everything" is applicable without limit to all the universe at once. Nothing is excluded by it or contrasted with it.

Perhaps the word "perception" for Hume functions in a manner similar to the word "everything." In many contexts it would mark a contrast. Suppose we are watching a magic show. If I trust my perceptions here, if that is all there is to it, then I must report that Mandrake sawed a woman in half. Of course in this context what I am calling "my perceptions" would signify only a small part of what Hume would term perceptions. The magician skillfully keeps the audience from getting the perceptions which would reveal his trick. The difference between illusion and reality cannot be made out in terms of "perceptions" and "objects," where the distinction is between private, subjective experience and public, objective

experience. At the magic show the public objective experience is of a woman being sawed in half and then magically reassembled without apparent damage. We judge that we have seen an illusion, a judgment which can only be made on the basis of other perceptions. Uniform and coherent past experience makes us believe that a person cannot be sawed in half and then made whole again in a flash.

Suppose Homer wants to leave all the lights on overnight in our house; he wants the cat to be able to see whether there are any mice around. We explain that the cat doesn't need the light, cats have powers of perception lacking in humans. To us it seems that they can see in the dark, for what looks dark to us is plenty of light for a cat's hunting. They have terrific night vision. Here we do contrast our perceptions with those of a cat, under adverse lighting conditions. However, the perceptions the cat will get (a mouse running across the living room floor) are perceptions which we can get too (for instance by turning on the overhead light at the right moment).

These examples encourage me to think that for Hume "all the perceptions of the human mind..." just means all we can know about in any way whatever.

Are there any other textual indications that Hume thinks perceptions are mental things? Yes, there are many indications. Certainly the examples supplied by Hume on the first page of the Treatise suggest the mental side of the mind/body distinction. Examples of impressions are sensations, passions and emotions; ideas are the faint images of these in thinking and reasoning. He says, "Every one of himself will readily perceive the difference betwixt feeling and thinking," (T 1-2) both of which fall under the mind category. Moreover, the topics which follow on the next several pages -- including memory, imagination, association of

ideas, abstraction, and our ideas of modes and substances -- uniformly focus our attention on the mind's operations. Again the "forelorn solitude" Hume encounters as the result of philosophizing is the loneliness of a mind that cannot find the connection it needs with an objective world and with other minds. It is the agony of a mind which cannot ascertain the adequacy of its perceptions: the adequacy, that is, to supply the mind with knowledge of the things it wants to know.

The "forelorn solitude" passages might usefully be regarded as instances of Hume's ironic philosophical wit. The tireless effort to understand the understanding only serves to heat the brain. The would-be understander, even if his efforts are an abject failure, will find himself "absolutely and necessarily determin'd to live, and talk, and act like other people in the common affairs of life." (T 269) His philosophical delirium is comical. But let us set the irony aside, for it is clear that the program of Book I does leave its author locked away in the chambers of his own mind by the end of the book. What the evidence in the foregoing paragraph shows, I suggest, is that Hume does become entangled in his own assumptions. No doubt about it, the seeds of his "solitude" were sown in the first sections of the project. This is not to say that the "perceptions" on page one were metaphysically mental -- they were just the contents of the human understanding, whatever that may encompass. It is rather to say that Hume's announced project of understanding our understanding was doomed from the start. There are too many things which we simply accept without justification.

III. Perceptions and Persons

It is appropriate now for us to describe "the person" who is available for examination when Hume considers personal identity. For the sake of ease and simplicity, let us consider one person only and consider him only from his own perspective. What sort of perceptions can a person have of himself?

Certainly, as Hume indicates in the famous introspection passage, I may "stumble upon some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure." (T 252) Indeed, a person may have several such perceptions at one moment. Someone might describe his current experience as follows: "Right now I feel the hot blast of an electric heater on my cold feet. I see the warm yellow light of the desk lamp. Black ink flows from the pen I am holding with my fingers. I can smell cigar smoke; it makes my eyes sting slightly. I look out the window, I am pleased to see that it is beginning to rain." All of this, and more, can come to one person as his perceptions in a small slice of time. In the next moment, his experience may shift. As Hume observes, "Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight...." (T 252-53)

Within Hume's account there is no apparent limit to the content of the perceptions we include in the series which constitutes some person's experience and identity. The person can witness or imagine any object or event we please; this certainly includes parts of and movements of his own body. It would be a bizarre mistake indeed if someone were to conclude, upon learning that all the paintings in a particular collection are oil paintings, that the subjects of all the paintings must be oily things. Yet it is analogous

to the conclusion that all objects of the mind must be of some determinate kind.

Hume's mental cramp about personal identity remains. He is still faced with the requirement that, "It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea," together with the fact that "...self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos'd to have a reference." (T 251) The idea must be fraudulent, therefore, because we have no access to any such underlying unitary thing in our experience. All we have is a series of perceptions. But how can a succession of different perceptions ever give rise to or justify the ascription of identity or sameness?

Terence Penelhum is correct, I think, in his ultimate assessment of Hume's conundrum. "So, in spite of Hume, there is no contradiction in saying that certain kinds of things are composed of a succession of parts, and yet are each only one thing. Whether a thing can have many parts or not depends entirely upon what sort of thing it is. Most things (including people) do." (Phil. Review, 580, my emphasis)

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1. David Hume, A Treatise of Human Nature, "Of Personal Identity," Section Six, Part IV, Book I, pp. 251-263 in the Selby-Bigge edition (Clarendon Press).

2. Terence Penelhum, "Hume on Personal Identity," Philosophical Review, Vol. LXIV, 1955, pp. 571-589.

   ------ "Hume's Theory of the Self Revisited," Dialogue, Vol. XIV, 1975, pp. 389-409.

   ------ Hume, St. Martin's Press, New York, 1975. See Ch. Four.

3. Antony Flew, Hume's Philosophy of Belief (Routledge & Kegan Paul: New York, 1961) p. 46.

4. It would be better to observe that no clear sense has been attached to the private/public distinction. Thus we sometimes keep a particular perception private, known only to one mind, as when I refuse to tell you my opinion of your spouse. This is not the intended sense of the word private, however, since my opinion here is in principle knowable by others. This perception can be shared.

   In thinking about Hume's impressions and privacy, I found it helpful to consult "Hume's Impressions and the Problem of Objective Knowledge," an unpublished manuscript by Max Thomas.

5. For a discussion of this point, see John Cook, "Hume's Scepticism With Regard to the Senses," American Philosophical Quarterly, Vol. 5, No. 1, 1968, pp. 1-17. See Section V.