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# David Hume on Personal Identity and the Indirect Passions

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## I

Scholarly reflection on Hume's "doctrine" of self and personal identity continues to focus on the sections "Of Personal Identity" and the "Appendix" to *A Treatise of Human Nature*. To answer the question of why we have so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions which make up experience, Hume says that we must distinguish betwixt personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves.<sup>1</sup> He considers only the former in these sections. Towards the end of the personal identity section he writes that *our identity with regard to the passions serves to corroborate that with regard to the imagination, by the making our distant perceptions influence each other, and by giving us a present concern for our past or future pains or pleasures* (T 261). In the advertisement to the *Treatise* Hume says that *the subjects of the understanding and passions make a compleat chain of reasoning by themselves* (T xii). In light of the importance Hume attaches to the distinction, and since there are many indications that the *Treatise* should be read as an integral whole, it is surprising that so little attention is given to what he says of personal identity in the other books.

As the title suggests, this paper concentrates on the second part of the distinction and especially on the discussion of the *indirect passions* in Book II of the *Treatise*. This is not to suggest that self does not play an important role elsewhere in Hume's *science of man*; for example, it is self which experiences the impression of will and the direct passions. However, the indirect passions have a particularly important part to play in ascriptions of personal identity and this justifies the present investigation.

## II

We can safely predict that personal identity *as it regards our passions* will not be the idea of some philosophers whose views of self as having the philosophical (strict) relation of identity Hume has rejected in "Of Personal Identity." The relationship between thought and passion to which he draws attention suggests that the idea of self in this context has a relation to the positive suggestions in that earlier section of why

we do speak meaningfully of the identity of the self. We are able so to speak because of a relationship which is *felt* to exist between a person's distinct and changing perceptions. The relationship has to do with the discovery by memory of the connection of a person's perceptions through the association of ideas by resemblance and causation (T 261).

Examination of the idea of self to which Hume makes frequent reference in Book II requires some review of the method of the *Treatise*. Perceptions make up human experience. Perceptions are either impressions or ideas which derive from impressions. Hume describes the indirect passions as *secondary or reflective* impressions and these stem from original impressions or from their ideas. He distinguishes between direct and indirect passions. Direct passions *arise immediately from good or evil, from pain or pleasure* (T 276). Examples are joy, hope and fear. Indirect passions *proceed from the same principles, but by the conjunction of other qualities* (T 276). That is, the indirect passions not only have a cause (an impression which excites them), but also an object (to which the passion directs our view when excited). We shall see that a significant quality of the indirect passions is the relation of these impressions to their objects, which are either one's own or another's self.

In Book II of the *Treatise* Hume examines the indirect passions: love, hate, pride and humility.<sup>2</sup> These passions are **evaluations** of persons; of self in the case of pride and humility, and of another in the case of love and hatred. Evaluation of persons is a central feature of Hume's moral philosophy: *To have the sense of virtue, is nothing but to feel a satisfaction of a particular kind from the contemplation of a character. The very feeling constitutes our praise or admiration* (T 471).<sup>3</sup> We shall see that the indirect passions in particular make an important contribution to the answer of Hume's original question of the source of our *propension to ascribe an identity*.

### III

Hume writes that pride and humility are *simple and uniform impressions* (T 277) and that love and hatred *produce merely a simple impression* (T 329). To speak of these passions as *simple* is confusing and rather misleading since Hume's description of the circumstances of the indirect passions is rather complex. It is possible to grasp his meaning by reference to impressions which have been taken by empiricists as simple, for example, "hot" or "red." When Hume identifies an impression as simple he means that it is impossible to define or analyze it because it has, so speak, no components to analyze. Árdal emphasises Hume's conviction that "for each meaningful term standing for a passion there must be a different impression," and "that one cannot understand the terms referring to [the passions] unless one

has experienced the relevant impressions."<sup>4</sup> Thus, the best description of simple impressions is pointing out examples, such as something which is "hot." In the first book Hume writes, *We cannot form to ourselves a just idea of the taste of a pine-apple, without having actually tasted it* (T 5). If a person has not had a particular impression she will not know that to which the term standing for the impression refers. The direct passions, for example, joy and anger, are also *simple* according to Hume. In calling the passions simple Hume seems to be referring only to the impression we experience by itself, isolated from any antecedent cause. The terminology is difficult and peculiar since it is hard to imagine the passions existing in such isolation. Although we may have reservations about Hume's terminology, we may yet admit our experience of impressions which correspond to the technical account he gives of the indirect passions. And this account is unintelligible without reference to a persisting person.

Hume is confident that all human beings are familiar with the simple impressions love, hate, pride and humility. Of the former pair he says that it will be possible to form a correct idea *without any danger of mistake* and of the latter pair that *they are sufficiently known from our common feeling and experience* provided that a description is given of the circumstances which accompany each passion. He begins a description of the situation of pride and humility with the observation that, despite being *directly contrary*, they have the same object. *This object is self, or that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness* (T 277). Kemp Smith writes that it seems odd to describe self as object, since we are more prone to speak of self as subject.<sup>5</sup> Hume's meaning is fairly clear. Evaluations relate to objects not subjects. The object of the evaluations which are pride and humility is self. Hume's choice of terminology is perhaps more compelling in the discussion of love and hatred in which the object of evaluation is different from the one who is experiencing the passion.<sup>6</sup>

The idea of self which is the object of pride and humility is a *succession of related ideas and impressions*. If this is the idea of self we possess then Hume is not (as has sometimes been suggested) slipping the idea of an identical self in through the back door.<sup>7</sup> In fact the phrase is clearly related to Hume's conviction, which he expresses in the personal identity section of Book I, *that all objects, to which we ascribe identity, without observing their invariableness and uninterruptedness, are such as consist of a succession of related objects* (T 255).

The phrase *of which we have an intimate memory* again draws attention to the significance of memory for ascriptions of self-identity. Hume holds that self is both discovered and produced by the memory (T 261). Memory discovers resemblance and causation. The belief that

my memory perceptions are related to previous impressions I have had contributes greatly to my belief that I am that person who had the original impressions. The belief that my perceptions are related by cause and effect allows me legitimately to postulate a continuous existence of which no experience is possible. In the first book memory contributes to attribution of personal identity by the discovery of resemblance and causation. These relations permit me to project my existence backwards in time, despite inevitable gaps in my remembered perceptions. In the above passage memory identifies ideas and impressions as mine. Thus, memory makes a double contribution to personal identity.

Hume's original question concerns our tendency to ascribe identity to a changing thing. Notice that, as regards the passions, he does not require an infallible memory to establish why it is that we have *so great a propensity*. In fact, the impressions I have of memory as providing an image of past perceptions which is characterized by particular order and vivacity of feeling is quite adequate to account for why I *feel* compelled to speak of myself as the same person through time. In the "Appendix" Hume writes,

*... we only feel a connection or a determination of the thought, to pass from one object to another. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind, the ideas of them are felt to be connected together.* (T 635)

Self is the *object* of pride and humility. Hume writes, *Here the view always fixes when we are actuated by either of these passions. According as our idea of ourself is more or less advantageous, we feel either of these opposite affections, and are elated by pride, or dejected with humility* (T 277). Pride and humility are connected with self in an intimate way. As Kemp Smith writes, although "neither pride nor humility, *qua* impression, contain the idea of the self, each none the less fixes the view of the mind upon it."<sup>8</sup> Hume himself writes, *When self enters not into the consideration, there is no room either for pride or humility* (T 277). It is a logical impossibility that I could feel proud and not attend to myself. If my attention is not to self then it is not pride which I am feeling.<sup>9</sup> These passions are positive and negative evaluations of self, just as love and hatred are evaluations of others. It is now possible to see how *self as it regards our passions* differs from *self as it regards our thought*. Some self is necessary for me to be either proud or ashamed, and I am certain that I sometimes feel pride and shame.

Hume's account of our inclination to ascribe identity to self is not simply a defense of mental-identity which is what might be suggested

by reading the first book in isolation. As regards the passions, and especially pride and humility, ascriptions of self-identity depend on these evaluations which concern *the qualities of our mind and body, that is, self* (T 303). In a passage in Book I he writes, *An infant becomes a man, and is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any change in his identity* (T 257).<sup>10</sup> These passages are clear statements that personal identity is not simply a question of mental identity, and that self is some sort of composite of mind and body for Hume.

Some commentators have taken Hume to have denied any notion of personal identity in the discussion in Book I. Penelhum, for example, claims that Hume's discussion of personal identity is an account of a mistake which we all continually make, "in referring to a person from day to day as the same person."<sup>11</sup> Kornegay claims that Hume intends the description of personal identity in Book I as an account of "bogus identity-preservation."<sup>12</sup> Attention to what Hume says of self in the second book might encourage another reading. One passage which suggests that Hume holds that self enjoys some sort of identity is the argument against self as the cause of pride and humility. Since pride and humility are opposite to one another in feeling yet share the same object, self, he argues that the self cannot be the cause of these passions (T 277-8). That is, Hume argues that the self cannot be the cause either of pride or humility because to be the cause of one passion would mean it was also the cause of the other, and this would mean it could cause only an equal proportion of each and we would be aware of neither. Now if self is only a bundle of changing perceptions, a view popularly attributed to Hume, how is it that he could use this particular argument against self as cause? For if self is only constantly changing perceptions it could presumably be the cause of pride at one time and of humility at another. Furthermore, Hume actually discusses qualities of mind or character as causes of these passions. The qualities of mind are perceptions. Thus, certain of my perceptions may cause pride or humility. These perceptions are not self but experiences which some self has. In this Hume clearly distinguishes between my self and my perceptions.

Penelhum speaks also of both the cause and the object as being the causes of indirect passions, neither being sufficient alone.<sup>13</sup> Pride and humility certainly require both causes and objects but Hume clearly distinguishes *betwixt that idea, which excites them, and that to which they direct their view, when excited* (T 278). The cause of a passion is always an idea. The object is also an idea. The indirect passion is an impression which stands between two ideas but it is misleading to describe them both as causes. As Hume writes,

*The first idea, that is presented to the mind, is that of the cause or productive principle. This excites the passion, connected with it; and that passion, when excited, turns our view to another idea, which is that of self. Here then is a passion plac'd betwixt two ideas, of which the one produces it, and the other is produc'd by it. (T 278)*

Recall that the passions are simple and that Hume is describing the ideas connected with them. Kemp Smith holds that the idea of self is not generated by the passions.<sup>14</sup> The final sentence of the above passage suggests that Hume may actually hold that pride and humility produce the idea of self. Passmore suggests that if this were Hume's intention it would be more correct to speak of self as the "effect" of the passion rather than the object.<sup>15</sup> This would imply that there is an idea of self which is the effect of pride and humility, although Passmore is one of those who hold that Hume is "not entitled ... to talk of an 'idea of ourselves'."<sup>16</sup> Since he holds that Hume is not so entitled he is not able to accept such an interpretation of the passage. On the other hand, he writes, "if ... pride itself views the self, this will involve a complete revision of Hume's epistemology."<sup>17</sup> The problems which Passmore identifies are not Hume's according to my interpretation. Hume is certainly entitled to the idea of self which he has put forward in the first book and that pride and humility direct our view to this self is not surprising, and this interpretation requires no revision of Hume's epistemology.

Capaldi is sympathetic to the view that the indirect passions play a vital role in revealing self to consciousness. He writes, "the object is the idea which follows from, or is caused by, the passion."<sup>18</sup> The process is not a simple succession in time, however, for upon feeling pride both cause and object are immediately present. One might take the view that the idea of self is actually produced by the passion but this would be difficult to square with what Hume says about the passions as *simple*, for if the idea is actually generated by the passions there would seem to be more to them than even Hume's use of the adjective could encompass. To make the theory of the passions work, Hume requires some independent idea of self to which the passions direct attention. Since this is the case, and in view of the centrality of the passions in Hume's moral theory, one should beware of interpretations which proclaim that Hume has no idea of self.

The discussion of pride and humility moves to a description of the *subject* and *quality* of the causes of these passions. There is a parallel discussion for love and hatred. The idea of the subject of the cause is complex, for it includes among other things the idea of self (or another self in the case of love and hatred). Anything which belongs to me or

which can in some way be related to me may be a *subject* (cause) either of pride or humility. It is in this sense that the idea of self is part of the cause of the indirect passions. If the *quality* of the thing is pleasant, then it is a source of pride; if it is painful, humility (T 279). At this point Hume is again going beyond views attributed to him, in that self is clearly related to different perceptions in different ways. Not all of my pleasant or unpleasant perceptions can be causes of pride or humility for me. I may take pleasure in a magnificent house which belongs to somebody unknown to me. Such pleasure would not give rise to pride since there is no connection between the subject and my self. Such a feeling of pleasure might give rise to a positive evaluation of the owner or the builder of the house, which would be "love" in Hume's sense. Hume is putting great weight on our ability to discern such relations appropriately, which means he must provide some account of the difference between myself and other persons. The key to this difference is also to be found in the account of the indirect passions, as we shall see.

For there to be pride or humility, then there must be some sort of relation between myself and the subject of the passion. This relation, on Hume's view (although he does not himself spell this out) must be in the realm of feeling rather than of thought. According to this view, thought or understanding *exerts itself after two different ways, as it judges from demonstration or probability; [and] as it regards the abstract relations of our ideas* (T 413). Reason then is unable to establish the sort of relationship which is implied when I say that something "belongs" to me. Even the necessary connection which would establish causation cannot be established by reason and lies rather in the realm of belief and feeling. Despite these limitations of reason each human individual inevitably feels more closely related to her own than to any other body. If it is vain to ask *Whether there be body or not?*, it is as vain to ask whether this body is mine (T 187). Unlike some relations a person's relation to her body is not a matter of human convention but of natural and inevitable belief.

Hume examines what it is that determines the object and cause (subject and quality) of these passions. He writes, *that these passions are determin'd to have self for their object, not only by a natural but also by an original property* (T 280). That a *natural* property determines the passions is shown by the constancy with which pride views its object. We have already argued that the relation is logical. However, Hume is implicitly making an interesting claim which is related to the idea that the indirect passions play a role in revealing self to conscious awareness. The passions, which are simple, presuppose an object, which can only be self (regardless of what self turns out to be). He also says that the passions are also determined to have self as their object

by an *original* property which he calls the *distinguishing characteristic of these passions* (T 280). This is a reference to Hume's philosophy of mind. The mind must possess certain *original* qualities for there to be any qualities whatever. *Now these qualities, which we must consider as original, are such as are most inseparable from the soul, and can be resolv'd into no other: And such is the quality, which determines the object of pride and humility* (T 280). This suggests that the source of the property can neither be discovered nor justified and yet we have no choice but to have self as the object of these feelings which we experience. Hume's comment that he *pretend[s] not to give any reason* for the self being the object of these passions is tied to his conviction that they are simple impressions of which all persons have experience.

Hume adds some qualifications to the system of the indirect passions which are also of interest. First, anything related to me which produces pleasure or pain may be a source of pride or humility. In this, *There is not only a relation requir'd, but a close one, and a closer than is requir'd to joy* (T 291). Hume is distinguishing various sorts of perceptions. Some of my perceptions are more closely related to me than others. When I experience joy at another person's party, it is truly my joy, but only she could be said to be proud. Another qualification is that the cause of the passion should be *obvious and discernible*, not only to ourselves but to others as well. That is, other people's perceptions are extremely important for our experience of the passions. Hume writes, *We fancy ourselves more happy, as well as more virtuous or beautiful, when we appear so to others* (T 292). We shall shortly examine *sympathy* which is the emotional principle by which he explains this. Another qualification also reveals something important about Hume's conception of self. The causes of the passions are passing and often of short duration. He writes,

*What is casual and inconstant gives but little joy, and less pride. We are not much satisfy'd with the thing itself; and are still less apt to feel any new degrees of self-satisfaction upon its account. We foresee and anticipate its change by the imagination ... We compare it to ourselves, whose existence is more durable; by which means its inconstancy appears still greater.* (T 293)

One characteristic of Hume's conception of self, then, is duration beyond any particular perceptions. This supports interpretations which stress the importance of memory for Hume's account of identity. A self with felt duration corroborates Hume's argument in Book I: Self is not simply the perceptions of which I am aware at a particular time.<sup>19</sup>

In the discussion of particular causes of pride and humility Hume writes that *pride and humility have the qualities of mind and body, that is self, for their natural and more immediate causes* (T 303). Self is mind and body. Concerning this John Bricke writes, "A theory of the self that is adequate to the understanding of the emotions must ... treat the self as a compound of mind and body." Here again we see the significance of the two views of personal identity. Bricke again writes,

Hume is well aware that questions of merely mental identity are narrowly restricted ones. He seems equally aware that posing such questions is compatible with recognizing that there are other questions about selves which must be posed as well.<sup>20</sup>

The idea of self as some sort of composite of mind and body is related to Hume's *natural belief* about the existence of body, a belief which reason can neither establish nor destroy. If reason is unable to establish that body exists, how could it establish that self is such a composite?

Hume introduces *sympathy* as a principle of communication of inclinations and sentiments between human beings, through which we understand and even experience others' feelings, however different they may be from our own. Our experience of sympathetic feeling establishes that, so far as feeling is concerned, there are other people. Sympathy is not a passion but a principle of communication by which I actually feel what another person feels. There is a relationship between sympathy and the idea of self. Elsewhere Hume remarks that *the minds of men are mirrors to one another* (T 365). This is part of what enables him to say that one feels another's sadness on seeing a sad face. He writes,

*'Tis is evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us, and that our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that 'tis not possible to imagine, that any thing can in this particular go beyond it ... Now 'tis obvious, that nature has preserv'd a great resemblance among all human creatures, and that we never remark any passion or principle in others, of which, in some degree or other, we may not find a parallel in ourselves. The case is the same with the fabric of the mind, as with that of the body.* (T 317-18)

When Hume writes that the impression of the self is *always* intimately with us, has he contradicted what he has said in the first

book about being unable to discover any impression *constant and invariable* (T 251)? In that context he wishes to undermine a particular view of the self as an identical and continuous something which exists over and above my perceptions and in which my perceptions inhere. The self to which he refers in the above passage is not this. However, in making the present claim Hume does seem to undercut one of the arguments against the idea of the philosophers since in that context he claims to be unable to discover **any** constant impression whatsoever which could give rise to such an idea. Here he says that the impression of self is **always** with us. I take him to mean that there is a present impression but that this impression is subject to continual change and thus the impression is not a *constant and invariable* impression which could give rise to the idea of a constant and invariable self held by *some philosophers*.

Penelhum complains that Hume has not suggested how to distinguish one's own self from other selves.<sup>21</sup> In fact Hume suggests an answer at several points in the account of the passions. For example, there is the fact that I do not mistake another for myself when I resemble him in any valuable quality of mind or character. Thus it seems that the simple positive evaluations of love and pride are really distinct although they resemble each other in being pleasant. These passions are distinguished only by their distinct objects and our feeling tells us that we make no mistake. Further to this, Hume's extension of the notion of self to include qualities of body gives a clear means of individuation. Qualities of body are subject to the same type of evaluations by which we judge another person's character. My own body is clearly distinct from any other.

We have examined Hume's notion of self as it is given in the discussion of the indirect passions. Penelhum has written that outside of the extended discussion of self in "Of Personal Identity," Hume's "other explicit references to it are quite few in number."<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, we have seen that Hume's conception of self pervades the analysis of the indirect passions pride and humility and an idea of other selves is likewise essential for experience of love and hatred. Further we see that the principle of sympathy reveals a great similarity between my own self and others as I experience an impression of another's passion. There is more to be said of the relation between the two views of personal identity which Hume distinguishes, but the present emphasis on self as regards at least the indirect passions is justifiable as part of a larger movement to take the *Treatise* as an integral whole.

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1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., rev. ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1987), 253. Further references ("T") will be given in parentheses within the body of the text.
2. Páll Árdal and others have suggested that Hume's meaning is more clear if for "humility" we read "shame." See Páll S. Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume's Treatise* (Edinburgh, 1966), 34.
3. For a thorough discussion of the indirect passions and their relation to Hume's moral philosophy see Árdal (above, n. 2). For readers familiar with Árdal's work it will be obvious that I am deeply indebted to him for pointing out the significance of the indirect passions in the *Treatise*.
4. Árdal (above, n. 2), 8.
5. Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (New York, 1941), 180.
6. It might seem natural to refer to the one who is evaluating as the "subject" of the evaluation but this would be extremely confusing in light of Hume's use of subject as will be apparent.
7. The traditional reliance on "Of Personal Identity" has led commentators to accuse Hume of inconsistency between what he says of self and personal identity in the *Treatise*. Concerning this, T. E. Jessop writes, "there is an apparently strange lack of relationship between some of the doctrines expressed in Book I and the rest. For example, the self that is denied there is here assumed and sometimes explicitly affirmed" (T. E. Jessop, "Some Misunderstandings of Hume," in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell [New York, 1966], 41).
8. Kemp Smith (above, n. 5), 179.
9. See Árdal (above, n. 2), 23. Árdal notices that Hume sometimes writes misleadingly as though the relationship between pride, humility and is purely contingent, as though my pride could somehow have another object.
10. Hume is primarily interested in mental identity in "Of Personal Identity" and drawing attention to this passage is not intended to suggest otherwise. In the passage he is attempting to account for mental identity by analogy with that identity attributed to plants, animals, and in this case, persons. Nevertheless, it can hardly be denied that the passage shows that Hume holds persons to possess some sort of identity, despite the obvious physical changes we undergo.
11. Terence Penelhum, "Hume on Personal Identity," in *Hume* (above, n. 7), 224. (First published in *The Philosophical Review* 64 [1955].)
12. R. Jo Kornegay, "Hume on Perfect and Imperfect Identity," *Dialogue* (1985): 214.

13. Terence Penelhum, "Self-Identity and Self-Regard," in *The Identities of Persons*, ed. Amelie Rorty (Berkeley, 1976).
14. Kemp Smith (above, n. 5), 179.
15. John Passmore, *Hume's Intentions* (London, 1980), 126.
16. Passmore (above, n. 15), 126.
17. Passmore (above, n. 15), 126.
18. Nicholas Capaldi, *David Hume: The Newtonian Philosopher* (Boston, 1975), 132.
19. In "The Self in Hume's Philosophy" Penelhum argues that Hume's self requires a persistence which it cannot have on the argument of Book I. This passage suggests that Hume believes it established that self in fact possesses duration as one of its attributes. See Terence Penelhum, "The Self in Hume's Philosophy," in *David Hume*, ed. K. R. Merrill and R. W. Shahan (Norman, Oklahoma, 1976), 13ff. For an account of personal identity with a particular stress on memory see J. I. Biro, "Memory, Mind and Society," 1987, photocopy.
20. John Bricke, *Hume's Philosophy of Mind* (Princeton, 1980), 99.
21. Terence Penelhum, *Hume* (London, 1975), 82.
22. Penelhum, "The Self in Hume's Philosophy," (above, n. 19), 9.