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Being Sure of One's Self: Hume on Personal Identity¹

Corliss Gayda Swain

A number of papers recently published on Hume's theory of personal identity have been devoted to the question: Why in the Appendix to the *Treatise* did Hume express complete or acute dissatisfaction with his account of personal identity in book 1 of that work?² In this paper I shall argue that no adequate answer can be given to this question because its presupposition—namely, that Hume discovered some reason to be dissatisfied with his account—is false. My thesis is that Hume did not write the section of the Appendix dealing with personal identity in order to raise new questions about the adequacy of his book 1 account of the mind; he wrote it in order to defend that account by showing that alternative explanations of personal identity are incoherent.³

Very briefly, this defense is as follows. In the Appendix Hume considers two hypotheses concerning the nature of the human mind: the first is the hypothesis accepted by many of the modern philosophers, namely, that the mind is a thinking substance which is both unitary and simple; the second is Hume's own account of personal identity, according to which "the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect."⁴ Drawing on arguments he had developed in *Treatise* 1.4.5 and 6, Hume shows in the Appendix that the first hypothesis, while pretending to account for the identity and simplicity of the self in terms of a mental substance and to offer a new foundation for knowledge, actually leads us into the same labyrinth of obscurities and contradictions in which the ancient philosophy was involved when it tried to account for the identity and simplicity of material objects in terms of material substances. The modern philosophy tried to solve the same kind of problem as did the ancients, using the same kind of resources as the ancients used, and for this reason it is involved in the same contradictions and obscurities when it tries to explain the nature of the mind as the ancients were when they tried to explain the nature of matter. Hume's response to this situation is not merely to reject both metaphysical systems but also to reject their formulation of the problems of identity through change and unity in diversity and the attendant criterion of adequacy for the solution. Hume is sceptical that the problem which both the ancient

and the modern metaphysicians set themselves can be solved,⁵ but this does not mean that he is sceptical about personal identity or his own account of it. In book 1 Hume had argued that a proper understanding of the real problem of personal identity leads to a real solution. In the Appendix he is concerned to show that this solution is not a solution to the (insoluble) problem that so preoccupied the metaphysicians. It is Hume's insistence that the metaphysicians' problem is insoluble that seems to have led commentators to think that Hume was dissatisfied with his own solution to the problem of personal identity.

On this view, the labyrinth of contradictions in which Hume finds himself in the Appendix is not a labyrinth he gets into upon *accepting* his own account of personal identity, but rather a labyrinth he finds himself in without that account. What the Appendix adds to Hume's positive account of personal identity is a clear statement of the destructive argument against metaphysical systems that try to have it both ways. Thus, the Appendix should be read not as a renunciation but as a defense.

I. Hume's "Renunciation"

Commentators who hold that Hume found a new problem that was connected with his book 1 account of personal identity seem to have some strong textual support for their view.⁶ In the introductory paragraph of the section in the Appendix dealing with personal identity, Hume says, "But upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (T 633).⁷ He confesses that his account of personal identity is "very defective" (T 635) and claims that all his hopes for it vanish (T 635). Hume finally pleads the privilege of a sceptic, claiming that the problem is "too hard for [his] understanding" (T 636). These passages taken together seem to provide considerable evidence that Hume has become dissatisfied with his earlier account of personal identity, and that he has found in it some previously unnoticed problem.

It is not clear, however, that we should take Hume's expressions of dissatisfaction and despair as indications that he was dissatisfied with his own positive account of personal identity, since his expressions of despair and dissatisfaction are qualified. When we examine these qualifications, we find that Hume's despair and dissatisfaction have to do with a set of explanatory goals that are foreign to and inconsistent with the account of the self that he developed in book 1.

When Hume claims that his account is "very defective," he does not say that it is defective as an account of the kind of personal identity we actually attribute to the self. Rather, he says that his account turns out

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to be very defective *when he proceeds to explain the principle which binds all our particular perceptions together and "makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity"* (T 635, emphasis added). If a satisfactory account of personal identity must explain this principle, then, Hume admits, his account is defective, but there is no reason for anyone, including Hume, to think that a satisfactory account of personal identity, especially one which denies the perfect identity and simplicity of the self, must explain this.

In book 1 Hume had already noted that his account did not explain this principle. Hume there posed the question, "whether in pronouncing concerning the identity of a person, we observe some real bond among his perceptions, or only feel one among the ideas we form of them" (T 259). He concluded that, on his account of personal identity, "identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them, because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them" (T 260). In other words, the identity Hume has discovered is not an identity that explains how all our different perceptions can actually be united with one another so as to form a perfectly identical self. From this we can conclude that Hume already knew when he wrote book 1 that his account of identity did not explain the principles that unite all our perceptions together; he realized that it only explains why we are led to believe that they form an identical self. This realization did not seem damaging in book 1, it did not lead Hume to despair of his account, in part because Hume had already established that we only *mistakenly* attribute a real simplicity and identity to the self anyway.

In the Appendix Hume may express himself differently, but he makes the same point—namely, that his account is not an account of the principle that binds our perceptions together. There is nothing in the statement that his account is very defective *as an account of this principle of connection* that even suggests that this defect poses a new problem for Hume's positive account of personal identity. If Hume had already noticed when he wrote book 1 that his account of personal identity does not explain the principle that *both* binds our different perceptions together *and* makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity, it seems odd that the very same observation should lead to despair in the Appendix. But if we take Hume's expression of despair as a sign of dissatisfaction with his book 1 account, we must conclude that he came to believe that this failure posed a problem. There is nothing in the Appendix that gives us any clue as to why Hume should now find this failure troubling.

Hume merely repeats the same complaint when he says that all his hopes for his account vanish when he comes "to explain the

principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness" (T 636). Here he adds that he cannot discover *any* theory that will satisfactorily account for this, and he tells us that the reason he cannot find a satisfactory account of *this connecting principle* is that he holds two other principles which he claims he "cannot render consistent" (T 636)—namely, "*that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*" (T 636).⁸ Hume does say in the Appendix that what he cannot hope for from his own account of personal identity, or from any other account for that matter, is that it explain the principle of connection or why we *correctly* attribute perfect identity to the self, but he does not say that or why he now sees this failure as problematic for his own account of personal identity. In fact, one of the features of Hume's positive account of personal identity is that it entails that we do *not* correctly attribute perfect identity to the self.⁹ The fact that he cannot discover the principle of connection that would enable him to explain why we do correctly attribute perfect identity to the self should count as a point in his favour rather than as a reason for despair.

What is puzzling about Hume's supposed renunciation of his former account is that he seems merely to be renouncing what he had already renounced, namely, the intelligibility of the notion of the "strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking being" (T 633). In book 1 Hume claimed that it was a mistake to attribute strict and proper identity and simplicity to the self, a mistake that led to contradictions and obscurity.¹⁰ He does not seem to have changed his mind about *this* in the Appendix. Indeed, he trots out all the old arguments that led him to deny this kind of self-identity and adds a few new ones.¹¹ But when he offers what seems to be a criticism of his own account, the criticism is just that it cannot explain, in terms of a principle of identity that binds different perceptions together, why we attribute strict and proper identity and simplicity to the self; for if it could explain the principle of connection, it would explain why we correctly attribute strict and proper identity to the self.

In summary, whenever Hume offers a specific criticism of his account of personal identity in the Appendix, his criticism is always that his account cannot explain the principle of connection that binds distinct perceptions together into a unity. Hume says that neither his own account of personal identity nor any other that has ever been suggested can explain this principle of connection, and that the reason they cannot do this has something to do with rendering his two principles consistent. He does not say that were his account correct, it would explain this principle of connection, nor does he say that his account makes no sense unless he can explain this principle. However, if Hume became completely dissatisfied with (or even mildly puzzled

by) his account of personal identity after he had reflected on the fact that it could not explain the principle of connection, it must have been because he came to believe that he needed to explain it; for if he did not think that he needed to explain it, then the fact that he could not explain it would not be damaging to his positive account as an account of the true idea of the human mind.

Given what Hume says in the text of the Appendix, we are faced with a choice: we can read the Appendix as Hume's renunciation of (or second thoughts about) his positive account of personal identity, in which case we must explain why Hume thought that he needed, after all, to explain the principle of connection in order to render his own account of the human mind satisfactory, or we can deny that the purpose of the section in the Appendix that deals with personal identity is to show that there is something wrong with the book 1 account of personal identity, in which case we must provide an alternative explanation for Hume's writing this section. Most of the attempts to explain why Hume needed to account for the principle of connection have been criticized elsewhere.¹² I will not review these criticisms here because I want to explore the second option.

Choosing the second option does not require that we deny the obvious fact that Hume's discussion of personal identity in the Appendix deals primarily with the deficiencies of his own account. It does commit us to an alternative explanation for his doing this. If Hume already realized when he wrote book 1 that his account had these deficiencies, we must explain why he is concerned to point them out once more in the Appendix. We must also explain the passage at the beginning of the section where Hume says that upon a review of his section on personal identity he found that he could neither correct his former opinions nor render them consistent. In addition, we need to explain Hume's retreat to scepticism in the Appendix; for if Hume thought that his account of personal identity was perfectly adequate for his purposes despite the fact that it could not explain the principle of connection, why does he plead the privilege of the sceptic at the end of this section of the Appendix?

In the next section I suggest an alternative reading of the Appendix which explains both Hume's scepticism and the labyrinth passage. On this reading the point of the Appendix was not to show that something was wrong with Hume's earlier account of personal identity,¹³ but rather to correct the mistaken impression Hume may have given at the beginning of *Treatise* 1.4.5 ("Of the immateriality of the soul") concerning the relation between ancient metaphysics and modern metaphysics. Hume had claimed that "[t]he intellectual world, tho' involv'd in infinite obscurities, is not perplex'd with any such contradictions, as those we have discover'd in the natural. What is

known concerning it, agrees with itself; and what is unknown, we must be contented to leave so" (T 232). Hume then noted that we do find some contradictions concerning intellectual substances, but he argued that people do not almost universally fall into these contradictions. In book 1 Hume attributed these contradictions to philosophical views which try to enlighten us about the intellectual world. It is to this passage that Hume alludes at the beginning of the section of the Appendix concerned with personal identity, and it is his former opinion that the intellectual world is free of contradiction and absurdity that he calls into question.

II. Metaphysics: Ancient and Modern

In order to understand Hume's expressions of despair and his retreat to scepticism in the Appendix it is useful to review his criticism of the ancient philosophy, for there are important parallels between Hume's criticism of the ancients and his criticism of attempts to explain the nature of the self. Moreover, Hume himself hints that the two metaphysical systems, that of the ancients and that of the moderns, are in much the same state. In the Appendix he says, "Philosophers begin to be reconcil'd to the principle, *that we have no idea of external substance, distinct from the ideas of particular qualities*. This must pave the way for a like principle with regard to the mind, *that we have no notion of it, distinct from the particular perceptions*" (T 635). To be reconciled to the first principle is to reject the metaphysical system of the ancients which tried to diminish our ignorance concerning the true nature of matter; to be reconciled to the second is to reject the metaphysical system of the moderns which tries to diminish our ignorance concerning the nature of the self. Another reason for looking at the section "Of the ancient philosophy" in connection with Hume's Appendix is that Hume himself alerts us to the fact that "there might be several useful discoveries made from a criticism of the fictions of the ancient philosophy, concerning *substances, and substantial forms, and accidents, and occult qualities*" (T 219). It would be a mistake to disregard this hint and to ignore Hume's criticism of the ancients when examining what he says about the modern fictions "of a *soul, and self, and substance*" (T 254).

Hume's examination of the ancient philosophy begins with a discussion of two contradictions: one is the contradiction between the acknowledged composition of objects and their supposed simplicity, the other is between the acknowledged variations of an object through time and the object's identity (T 219).¹⁴ We encounter these same contradictions with respect to the mind. The mind or self is supposed to be simple, and yet we grant that it has many distinct perceptions, some of them co-occurring. We also claim that the mind is identical with

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itself from moment to moment, even though we also grant that it changes from moment to moment.

In "Of the antient philosophy" Hume answers two questions about these contradictions as they pertain to external objects. The first is: What causes "make us almost universally fall into such evident contradictions?"¹⁶ The second question is: By what means do we try to conceal these contradictions (T 219) or, in other words: How do we try to reconcile the contradictions?

Hume's causal explanation concerning identity is that we attribute identity to changing objects because "as the ideas of the several distinct *successive* qualities of objects are united together by a very close relation, the mind, in looking along the succession, must be carry'd from one part of it to another by an easy transition, and will no more perceive the change, than if it contemplated the same unchangeable object" (T 220).

We recognize the *difference* between the object at one time and the object at another when, instead of tracking the object through its stages, we consider it at two different times, the second after a considerable change.¹⁶ To explain how we almost universally come to embrace a manifest contradiction Hume must distinguish between the kind of identity we ascribe to unchangeable, continued objects (perfect identity) and the kind of identity we ascribe to changing objects (imperfect identity). By making this distinction Hume can tell the causal story without embracing these contradictions himself.

Hume offers the same causal account of why we ascribe a perfect identity to the self despite the fact that the self changes from moment to moment.

But tho' these two ideas of identity, and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct, and even contrary, yet 'tis certain, that in our common way of thinking they are generally confounded with each other. That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable object, and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, are almost the same to the feeling, nor is there much more effort of thought requir'd in the latter case than in the former. The relation facilitates the transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage as smooth as if it contemplated one continu'd object. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects. (T 253-54)

Having explained in "Of the antient philosophy" how we almost universally come to embrace a manifest contradiction, Hume goes on to explain how we manage to conceal this fact from ourselves. We feign or posit "something unknown and invisible, which [is supposed] to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something [is called] a *substance, or original and first matter*" (T 220).

The modern metaphysicians also "feign some new and unintelligible principle" (T 254) which is supposed to continue the same under all these variations, and their unintelligible something is also called a substance (T 254). Or they "imagine something unknown and mysterious," other than the natural relation of causation, something which connects the perceptions themselves (T 254).

Hume accounts for our embracing the contradiction that a simple object is nonetheless composite in a similar manner. The close relations between the qualities that constitute a peach, for example, makes the collection of these qualities affect the mind in the same way that a perfectly simple object does (T 221). But when these qualities are considered in a different light, each seems different, distinguishable, and separable (T 221). So we also consider the object to be composite. The notion of substance is again called into service to cover over the contradiction. In this case substance is supposed to be a "principle of union or cohesion among these qualities, and ... what may give the compound object a title to be call'd one thing, notwithstanding its diversity and composition" (T 221). Hume gives the same account of the notion of the simplicity of the mind: "An object, whose different co-existent parts are bound together by a close relation, operates upon the imagination after much the same manner as one perfectly simple and indivisible, and requires not a much greater stretch of thought in order to its conception. From this similarity of operation we attribute a simplicity to it" (T 263).

The notion of substance does double duty for the ancients. It is supposed to explain how an object which is not the same as it was can still be the same as it was, and it is supposed to explain how an object that is made up of parts can still be a simple and uncompounded object. Substance provides the principle of unity. Diversity is accounted for in terms of accidents. These accidents (or modes or actions)¹⁷ are supposed to be connected to the substance by means of the relation of inhesion. Distinct qualities are said to inhere in a substance as accidents; the substance is the thing in which accidents are combined, or the principle of connection.

The notion of substance plays the same two roles in the modern philosophy. It is supposed to explain how a mind (or self) which is not the same as it was can still be the same as it was, and it is supposed to explain how a self which consists of a number of distinct,

contemporaneous perceptions which are its parts can, nonetheless, be simple.

Hume's criticism of the ancient philosophy is telling. First, he objects that the notions of substance, accident, and inhesion are unintelligible or incomprehensible and may as well be called occult qualities (T 222). He makes the same criticism of the notion of an intellectual substance.¹⁸ The second criticism is that the ancients sought for something that "for ever flies from us; and ... in a place, where 'tis impossible it can ever exist" (T 223). What they sought for was some principle of connection that would explain how distinct objects (or qualities) could be connected in a simple (yet composite) and identical (yet changing) object (T 223). Where they sought for it was in matter or causes (T 223).

In the Appendix Hume again despairs of finding a principle of connection, only here he is looking for one that would explain how distinct perceptions could be connected in a simple (yet composite) and identical (yet changing) self. He concludes here that no theory can give him any "satisfaction on this head" because no theory can be made consistent with his two principles.

Variants of these two principles play a role in Hume's criticism of the ancient philosophers. According to Hume, the ancient philosophers recognized that there is "no known connexion among objects. Every different object appears to them entirely distinct and separate; and they perceive, that 'tis not from a view of the nature and qualities of objects we infer one from another" (T 223). In other words, they recognized principles like the two principles Hume mentions in the Appendix, namely, that all distinct objects are distinct existences and that the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences. Hume says that this should have led them to give up on trying to find a principle of connection between these existences in matter, or in causes. Instead, "they frequently search for the qualities, in which this [power or] agency consists, and are displeas'd with every system, which their reason suggests to them, in order to explain it" (T 223).

Had these philosophers looked to the mind to find this principle, as Descartes and other modern philosophers did, they would have been just as dissatisfied. Once they accepted the two principles—the first restated to cover the relevant objects, namely, perceptions—they would have been forced to give up the search for this principle of connection; for if they try to explain the principle in terms of mental substance, the soul, or self, or by positing some unknown relation other than the natural relation of causation (which according to Hume does not explain this principle), the outcome will be contradiction and absurdity.¹⁹

At the end of section 3, "Of the antient philosophy," Hume tells us how the true philosophy responds to the situation the ancients find themselves in. The true philosophy does not try to solve the problem of the one and the many and identity through change, nor does it try to cover up the contradictions between perfect identity and change and between perfect simplicity and composition by appealing to unknown, unintelligible, occult qualities. Recognizing that the two principles entail that it is impossible to discover an explanation of the power or principle that binds the material world together, the true philosopher abandons the search.²⁰ The true philosopher sees that no explanation of the principles by means of which distinct existences are connected will be satisfactory because the only connections we ever perceive between distinct existences are causal connections and causal connections do not provide us with an idea of the power, agency, or principle that connects one distinct object or quality with another.²¹ In other words, the proper response to the recognition that the two principles are inconsistent with any intelligible account of the metaphysical glue that holds the material world together is moderate scepticism (T 224).

When Hume pleads the privilege of a sceptic once again in the Appendix, he does so for the same reason: the two principles he accepts are incompatible with any explanation of the metaphysical glue that binds the mental world together.²² If the true philosophy rejects the metaphysical system of the ancients, it must also reject the metaphysical system of the moderns because distinct perceptions, no less than distinct qualities, are distinct existences, and the mind never perceives any connections between distinct existences. In fact, there is even more reason to give up the modern system than the ancient. Whereas external objects might be thought to have an existence specifically different from our perceptions of them, so that it would not be completely unreasonable to suppose that they could have powers and properties which we cannot perceive, the perceptions that make up the mind are not taken to be specifically different from themselves. Therefore, what binds distinct perceptions together in the mind cannot be some quality that our perceptions have insofar as they are independent of perception.

III. Out of the Labyrinth

Hume says in the Appendix that he had once hoped that our theory of the intellectual world would be free of those contradictions and absurdities that we find in every theory of the material world,²³ but he has found upon a more strict review of his section on personal identity that his hopes were groundless. The contradictions he found in accounts of the material world were contradictions between an object's

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identity and difference and between its simplicity and composition. Attempts to resolve those contradictions by appealing to such things as substances, accidents, and inhesion introduced obscurity and further contradictions. When Hume reviews his section on personal identity, he finds that in this section he encountered these same contradictions and absurdities, this time in connection with the intellectual world. There are the same initial contradictions between identity and change, simplicity and composition, and there are the same absurdities generated by attempts to resolve the contradictions by positing substances, accidents (or actions), and the relation of inhesion. Before he began investigating these matters, Hume had believed with the vulgar that a table could remain the same table even if someone painted it a different colour and that a person could remain the same person even though she had new experiences and ideas. (These, I suggest, are the "former opinions" which Hume could neither correct nor render consistent.) Upon a little reflection he discovered that this could not be. At *this* stage he did not know how to render his former, pre-theoretical opinions consistent, nor did he know how to correct them. If he tried to render them consistent by positing mental substances, accidents, and the relation of inhesion, he merely introduced new contradictions and absurdities. He discovered that no resolution of the initial contradiction was possible because any attempt to resolve the contradictions between the strict identity of the self and changes in the self and between the strict simplicity of the self and its being composed of parts will result in an account that conflicts with his two principles. It will either have to deny that distinct perceptions are distinct existences, able to exist on their own (this is what is denied when the relation of inhesion is posited) or it will have to deny that the mind never perceives any connection between distinct existences (this is what is denied when a supposedly intelligible principle of connection, such as a substance, is posited).

If no account of the strict identity and simplicity of the self could be made consistent with Hume's two principles, and he could renounce neither of them, then Hume had no choice but to deny the strict identity and simplicity of the self (as well as that of other changing objects). But it was still impossible for him to renounce his former opinions about tables and selves. In order to correct these opinions and render them consistent he had to "take the matter pretty deep" (T 253), examining why he should attribute identity to objects that are not strictly identical and simplicity to objects that are not strictly simple.²⁴ He discovers that there are two kinds of objects "capable of placing the mind in the same disposition" (T 203): strictly identical objects and successions of related objects. We attribute identity to the latter as well as to the former, but it is not the same kind of identity, and attributing this kind of imperfect

identity to tables and selves does not land us in any contradictions. If we accept this explanation of the identity of changing objects and a similar one for the simplicity of composite objects, we shall not have to explain how an object could be exactly the same as it was and still be different and how an object could be simple and still composed of parts. A single succession of related objects can change and still be the same succession of related objects; a single collection of related, co-existing objects can consist of distinct parts and still be that single collection of related objects. There is no contradiction that requires a metaphysical resolution. Thus, Hume has found a way to correct his former opinions and to render them consistent.

If metaphysicians still want to claim that there is more to the self than just "a system of different perceptions . . . , which are link'd together by the relation of cause and effect" (T 261), that there is a *self*, an entity with its own essence, its own perfect unity and identity, then they must solve a very difficult problem, the problem of explaining the principle of connection. This problem is too hard for Hume's understanding; and Hume says quite explicitly that his account of personal identity is "very defective" if it is seen as a solution to it. This, however, does not mean that Hume's account is defective. Hume can afford to plead the privilege of a sceptic with respect to the metaphysicians' question and thus ignore their criteria of adequacy for its solution because he already has a perfectly adequate account of the only self he has ever encountered.²⁵

On this reading, the despair to which Hume is driven in the Appendix is the kind of despair he recommends in the Introduction to the *Treatise* as an antidote to vain philosophical pretensions. There he says that despair of finding the ultimate principles of the soul has almost the same effect on the mind as satisfying the desire to find these principles: one is content to give up the search (T xviii). When Hume explained the nature of the human mind in terms of a succession of related perceptions, he "arrived at the utmost extent of human reason" (T xviii). The despair to which he confesses in the Appendix prevents him from looking any further to find the ultimate principles of the human mind, but it does not vitiate the conclusions he had already established. Moreover, the fact that his system was subject to this defect proves nothing, since this defect in his system is "common to it with all the sciences, and all the arts" (T xviii).

Even though Hume has discovered that he does not need to solve these hard problems, he is not unmindful of the consequences of giving up the search for principles of connection. If we cannot explain these principles of connection, then we will never be able to know what *must* exist given the existence of something else. Many attempts to prove the existence of God and of the material world require that we be able to do this.²⁶ Hume's scepticism rules it out. Furthermore, if we cannot

explain these principles of connection, we shall never be able to explain why things are as they are, or why a particular existence is connected with some existences and not with others. Such explanations will be forever beyond us.²⁷ All we can know is that some existences are connected with some other existences, but we cannot even know this with certainty, since as long as we confess that we do not understand the principle of connection, we must confess that we have no reason to believe that things could not be otherwise. Insofar as certainty requires proof that things could not be otherwise, we shall never be certain of anything concerning existences. It would be nice if we could discover the principles that bind distinct existences together. If we could, we could deduce the existence of one thing from the existence of another, we could explain why things are the way they are, and we could be certain of our conclusions. Hume despairs of this possibility. Since explaining the principles that unite all our distinct perceptions together is impossible, we must be content to rely on our senses, memory, and on the "trivial qualities of the fancy" (T 217) or principles of the imagination²⁸ to inform us of existences and connections, all the while remembering that no matter how carefully we reason and no matter how carefully we try to guard against the errors that these faculties sometimes lead us to make, the conclusions we draw are not established with certainty. And this is the heart of Hume's scepticism.

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2. For example, Robert Fogelin, *Hume's Scepticism in the Treatise of Human Nature* (London, 1985), and "Hume's Worries About Personal Identity" (Manuscript, 1990); Don Garrett, "Hume's Self-Doubts About Personal Identity," *The Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 337-58, and "Three New Theories of Hume's Second Thoughts About Personal Identity" (Paper presented at the Seventeenth Hume Congress, Canberra, 1990); Jane MacIntyre, "Is Hume's Self Consistent?" in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. David Fate Norton, Nicholas Capaldi, and Wade Robison (San Diego, 1979); and Wade Robison, "Hume on Personal Identity," *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 12 (1974): 181-93, and "In Defense of

Hume's Appendix," in *McGill Hume Studies* (above), 89-99, to name just a few of the most recent.

3. I agree with Tom Beauchamp "Self-Inconsistency or Mere Self Perplexity," *Hume Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 1979): 37-44; and John Biro "Hume on Self-Identity and Memory," *The Review of Metaphysics*, 30 (1976): 19-38, and "Hume's Difficulties with the Self," *Hume Studies* 5, no. 1 (April 1979): 45-54, that Hume found no fundamental difficulty in his account of personal identity.
4. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2d ed., rev., ed. P. H. Nidditch (1978; reprint, Oxford, 1987), 261 (hereafter cited as "T").
5. In fact, he argues that it cannot be solved.
6. It should be noted that not all commentators who take this line think that Hume's dissatisfaction is a dissatisfaction with his account of personal identity. Robison, "Personal Identity," and "Hume's Appendix" (above, n. 2), for example, suggests that Hume found his account of personal identity compelling, but saw a conflict between it and two other principles that play an important role in book 1. If Robison is correct, then Hume should have concluded that something, but not necessarily his account of personal identity, had to go.
7. This passage is the most problematic for my interpretation of the Appendix. I will argue later that the former opinions that Hume could not correct or render consistent were not the opinions he developed in sec. 6 concerning the true idea of the human mind, but rather his pre-theoretical opinions about the identity of the self. To support my reading of this passage I must suppose that Hume is repeating the arguments he gave in bk. 1, starting at the beginning, rather than continuing the discussion from where he left off in sec. 6. This is not an unreasonable supposition, given the allusion in the opening lines of the relevant part of the Appendix to the opening lines of sec. 5, "Of the immateriality of the soul," where Hume's discussion of the true idea of the human mind begins, and given the statement at the end of the first paragraph of that same part of the Appendix, which suggests that Hume is going to rehearse arguments he had already given to show that his view of the mind is the correct one. Hume says, "I shall propose the arguments on both sides, beginning with those that induc'd me to deny the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking being" (T 633).
8. Since these two principles are consistent with each other, when Hume says that he cannot render them consistent, he must mean that he cannot render them consistent with some third thing.

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9. Hume does explain why we *mistakenly* attribute perfect identity to the self.
10. See T 232-234, 251f., and 254.
11. For a summary of these arguments in sec. 5 and the Appendix see Fogelin, "Hume's Worries" (above, n. 2), 4-8. I agree with almost everything Fogelin says in these pages, except with his conclusion that "each individual perception—as a centre of sentience—already counts as a self" (p. 8). Had Fogelin said "each individual perception already counts as a substance of a 'self', if self is defined as a simple and identical mental substance," I would find nothing to disagree with. It should be noted that Fogelin's analyses of Hume's arguments do not justify his claiming that perceptions themselves are centres of sentience, that perceptions perceive, think, feel, etc. For a discussion of this point see John Biro, "Hume and Cognitive Science," *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 2 (1985): 269, and "Difficulties with the Self" (above, n. 3), 51.
12. See Fogelin, "Hume's Skepticism" (above, n. 2), 101-6 for criticism of MacIntyre (above, n. 2); D. G. C. MacNabb, *David Hume: His Theory of Knowledge and Morality*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1966); J. A. Passmore, *Hume's Intentions*, rev. ed. (New York, 1968); Robison, "Personal Identity" (above, n. 2); Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, 1977); Don Garrett, "Hume's Self-Doubts About Personal Identity," *The Philosophical Review* 90 (1981): 337-58; and Terence Penelhum, "Hume on Personal Identity," in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell (New York, 1966). Garrett, "Hume's Self-Doubts" (above), 339-50, discusses Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London, 1941); Robison "Personal Identity" (above, n. 2); Stroud (above); A. H. Basson, *David Hume* (Baltimore, 1958); and S. C. Patten, "Hume's Bundles, Self-Consciousness, and Kant," *Hume Studies* 2, no. 2 (November 1976): 59-64. He criticizes Fogelin's proposals ("Hume's Skepticism" [above, n. 2]) in "Three New Theories" (above, n. 2), 5-15. See Robison, "Personal Identity" (above, n. 2), 188f. for another criticism of Kemp Smith. Biro offers a general criticism of circularity proposals including those of MacNabb (above); Passmore (above); Robison, "Personal Identity" (above, n. 2); MacIntyre (above, n. 2); and Penelhum (above); in "Difficulties with the Self" (above, n. 3). This paper also contains more specific criticisms of MacIntyre and MacNabb on pp. 51-52.
13. Robison might agree that it was not intended to show that there was something wrong with his account of personal identity, but Robison does think it was intended to show that something was wrong in bk. 1. According to him, Hume found that he could not reconcile his bk. 1 account of personal identity with the two

- principles which he can neither reject nor make consistent. If I am correct, then even this milder claim must be rejected.
14. The contradictions are evident. An object which is simple is one that is not a composite. So to claim that one and the same object—for example, a peach—is simple and yet is composed of a number of distinct qualities—for example, colour, taste, shape, etc.—is to embrace a contradiction. The contradiction involved in the notion of identity is likewise evident. Something which is identical with something else is the same as it. So to claim that an object is the same as it was even though it has changed—that is, even though it is not the same—is to embrace a contradiction.
 15. Note the qualification “almost universally.” It may be that some people, under the right conditions, can avoid falling into these contradictions. Perhaps by reflecting on the fact that successions of related perceptions feel the same to the mind as the perception of an unchangeable object and that we are likely to confound the two, we can avoid attributing the same kind of identity to changing objects and to unchangeable ones, and thus avoid the contradiction.
 16. This analysis is beautifully illustrated by Descartes’ wax in Meditation 2 (*The Meditations Concerning First Philosophy*, in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes*, ed. Elizabeth Haldane and G. R. T. Ross [Cambridge, 1977]). When we watch the progress of the wax from beginning to end, we think of it as the same thing. When we consider it before melting and after, without considering the intermediate steps, we get the idea of diversity.
 17. See T 244-46 where Hume discusses the plausibility of speaking of actions, rather than accidents or modes, of the mental substance, arguing that the move does not work.
 18. See Fogelin, “Hume’s Worries” (above, n. 2), 4-8.
 19. Garrett, “Hume’s Self-Doubts” (above, n. 2) found Beauchamp’s interpretation of the Appendix unconvincing because “Hume is worried about a contradiction, and the mere unavailability to us of further causal explanation does not produce one” (p. 347). I am arguing here that the contradiction Hume is worried about is the contradiction between any supposed principle of connection and his two principles.
 20. It should be kept in mind that the two principles rule out even inferences to the best explanation. Such inferences have to posit an intelligible power or agency, otherwise they explain nothing. If the power or agency is a causal one, it will be intelligible but will fail to provide the metaphysical glue, and there is no other kind of intelligible power or agency to which one could appeal.

21. Hume argues both in the *Treatise* and in the *Enquiry*, that when we discover a causal connection between objects, we discover that the objects are in fact connected; but we never discover why they are connected or the nature of the power or agency that unites them.
22. Biro, "Difficulties with the Self" (above, n. 3) argues that memory perceptions, because they are essentially intentional, can supply the glue that Hume was looking for (p. 52), but the glue that the intentionality of memory perceptions provides is not metaphysical glue, and Biro is well aware of this. Biro is concerned to show that Hume can explain our attributions of personal identity without positing any metaphysical glue and without violating any of his other principles. He does this by showing that within our experience we can discover connections between perceptions that do not presuppose a substantial self or any other perfect identity (as would exist, for example, between a set of perceptions and the same set). Memory perceptions can explain this, first of all because having them does not require any metaphysical glue: all that is required is a causal connection between the earlier perception and the memory perception. Furthermore, memory perceptions do not unite the distinct perceptions themselves. I remember going to the store a few days ago; that is one perception. I experienced going to the store; that is another perception (or a bundle of them). What is the connection between the two? To say that the memory perception is essentially intentional is merely to say *that* it is connected to the earlier perception (presumably by relations of resemblance and causation), but it does not explain why or how the two are connected. Memory does provide some kind of glue, the kind of glue Hume actually needs, but it does not provide metaphysical glue. If Biro is right about this, then Hume can do without such glue, and yet another hypothesis about Hume's problem in the Appendix has to be abandoned.
23. Hume expresses this hope on T 232. There he claims that the only contradictions we encounter in the intellectual world are those introduced by philosophers when they try to diminish our ignorance, and that the "intellectual world, tho' involv'd in infinite obscurities, is not perplex'd with any such contradictions, as those we have discover'd in the natural. What is known concerning it, agrees with itself" (T 232).
24. It should be noted that Hume's discovery of the two different kinds of identity and of the reason we tend to confound the two is presented as the answer to a question that Hume claims is "*of the last importance*" (T 203, emphasis added).

25. See T 252 where Hume chides the metaphysicians for thinking that they perceive something simple and continued, which they call themselves. Perhaps they do, he says, but as for the rest of mankind "they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions" (T 252). In the Appendix Hume takes back this claim about how the rest of humankind sees itself.
26. Even Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. John Yolton [London, 1965]), who found the notion of substance useless in explaining the identity of the self, thought he could deduce the existence of God from the existence of the self.
27. John Biro, "Description and Explanation in Hume's Science of Man," *Voltaire Studies* (1979): 453f., makes this same point. It should be noted that the fact that we cannot explain the ultimate principles of connections does not mean that we cannot explain anything. Whenever we discover any causal law, we discover a principle of connection that enables us to explain the events that are covered by the law; and the more general the law, the more it enables us to explain. Hume despairs of finding the *ultimate* principles of connection. Because we cannot discover these ultimate principles we cannot hope to explain the causal nexus itself; we cannot explain why these causal laws rather than some others actually obtain.
28. Fogelin pointed out to me in conversation that whenever Hume uses the term, 'the fancy' rather than the more neutral term, 'the imagination', in pt. 4 of bk. 1, he is taking an exaggeratedly sceptical stand. This should shed some light on the true nature of Hume's scepticism. If he takes a dismissive attitude towards the imagination (as, for example, Descartes did), he ends up with radical scepticism. If he is willing to give the imagination its due, he ends up with moderate scepticism—that is, scepticism concerning our ability to understand the world using reason alone, thus arriving at conclusions of which we can be certain and which explain why the world is as it is and could not be otherwise.