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*Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century***
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JANE L. McINTYRE

Introduction

In the chapter on personal identity in Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Hume wrote, “We now proceed to explain the nature of *personal identity*, which has become so great a question in philosophy, especially of late years in *England*, where all the abstruser sciences are study’d with a peculiar ardour and application.”¹ Most contemporary philosophers have little idea of the extent of the debate to which Hume obliquely refers. Who were the philosophers who applied themselves with ardor to the question of personal identity, and what, if anything, can we learn from their arguments? In *Naturalization of the Soul* Raymond Martin and John Barresi chart the changing views on the nature of the self and personal identity in eighteenth century England. “Newton had shown,” they argue “that there could be a natural philosophy of the external world. Progressive eighteenth century thinkers were intent on showing that there could also be a natural philosophy of the internal

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world."² Their chronicle not only fills a gap in our knowledge of the early modern period, but also shows that many elements of philosophical debates about personal identity in the latter part of the twentieth century recapitulate (often unknowingly) well-worn debates of an earlier period. In the history of philosophy, as in history more generally, opportunities to learn from the past are often missed.

Martin and Barresi's Argument

It is, of course, impossible to describe here more than the broad strokes of Martin and Barresi's argument. Until the late seventeenth century the self was primarily understood as a soul—an indivisible, immaterial substance that served as the substratum of thought and survived the death of the body. Philosophers assumed that the identity of the self throughout a person's life and in the afterlife was based on the identity of this immaterial substance. Locke opened the modern debate over the nature of the self and personal identity by arguing explicitly that the concept of a person is quite different from the concept of a soul. According to Locke, consciousness was essential to the concept of a person, and therefore the identity of a person had to be tied to the continuity of consciousness—a view that Martin and Barresi accurately describe as relational. On Locke's view, the identity of an immaterial substratum is neither necessary nor sufficient for the identity of a person. For the same reasons, Locke also concluded that personal identity does not depend on the identity of a human body. Persons, according to Locke, are not substances.³ Most notoriously, Locke also suggested that God might have given to matter the power to think. Although this was not explicitly a part of his account of personal identity, it was not unrelated to his relational view. For, if divisible material substances might be the substratum of thought, thinking selves have no essential underlying unity.

Locke's account of personal identity prompted a storm of responses, including the immensely influential debates, read throughout the eighteenth century, between the rationalist Newtonian Samuel Clarke, a defender of the simplicity and immateriality of the soul, and the materialist and free thinker Anthony Collins. Clarke argued that consciousness could not reside in any divisible substance, and therefore the conscious self was necessarily simple and immaterial. Further, Clarke was the first to argue that a relational account of personal identity could not explain why a person is concerned with her past or her future. Similarly, according to Clarke, moral responsibility requires the existence of a simple, indivisible, and therefore immaterial, self. Collins, on the other hand, argued against Clarke that conscious experience

did not require the support of a simple self. The self, according to Collins, was constituted by a succession of related parts.

Through the Clarke-Collins debate, the consideration of examples of personal duplication and fission became a staple of the eighteenth century arguments surrounding personal identity. On most relational accounts of personal identity fission is a logical possibility, since at any time more than one person could stand in the same relation to a given person in the past. Clarke, Butler, and a host of lesser-known figures appealed to the possibility of personal fission to argue against Locke, and in favor of the view of the self as a simple soul. Martin and Barresi are struck by similarity between these arguments and the discussion of cases of fission in contemporary analyses of personal identity. Although I agree with them on the importance of these examples, I have doubts about how they contribute to the development of a naturalized view of the self, as I will discuss below.

According to Martin and Barresi, very few philosophers after Collins—perhaps only Hume—fully embraced the consequences of the Lockean position.⁴ On the contrary, many philosophers of mind of the eighteenth century, such as David Hartley, Abraham Tucker and Thomas Reid, remained committed to the existence of an immaterial soul, but “bracketed” this commitment while working on parts of the philosophy of mind, such as associationist psychology, that could be developed with introspective methods grounded in experience. In this way, according to Martin and Barresi, empirical approaches to understanding the self began to marginalize the view that the self is a soul. By the end of the eighteenth century Joseph Priestly and William Hazlitt were able to jettison the soul in favor of a fully materialist theory of the mind. Anticipating by more than a century Parfit’s well known position, they argued that whether a person is identical over time does not matter—the requirements of moral responsibility, can be met without identity. And Hazlitt also argued that the recognition that I am not identical with a future self undermines arguments derived from self-interest, and promotes a disinterested moral perspective (*Naturalization*, 143).

Priestly and Hazlitt had the misfortune (according to Martin and Barresi) of being eclipsed by Kant: in philosophy, their approach to the self did not come to fruition until the second half of the twentieth century, and then not as a result of their influence. In the nineteenth century, as psychology separated itself from philosophy, psychologists carried forward the naturalizing tradition regarding the self: in particular, they began to address the developmental question of how an idea of the self is actually acquired. Current philosophical work on personal identity focuses on whether personal identity can best be explained by intrinsic or extrinsic relations, on whether

persons are three or four-dimensional entities, and whether personal identity matters. According to Martin and Barresi, the final result of trying to understand persons not as souls, but as part of the natural world, has been the fragmentation—or perhaps disintegration—of the philosophical problem of personal identity.

What is a Naturalistic View of the Self?

Martin and Barresi describe the changes in the understanding of the self in the eighteenth century as a naturalization of the soul, but they do not directly discuss what counts as naturalism. How do they think historians of philosophy should gauge the degree to which a given theory of the self reflects progress towards a naturalized view? Some markers of this progress are clear. On one dimension, the theory of the self becomes naturalized as it becomes less super-natural—less tied, that is, to assumptions derived from religion. On another dimension, the understanding of the self becomes more naturalistic as it is more fully integrated into a general account of the natural world grounded in experience.

Martin and Barresi place considerable importance on the emergence of psychological theories about the acquisition of the concept of the self. This seems to indicate that they also hold that a naturalistic account of the self should treat empirical discoveries about the mind as relevant to philosophy. For example, they state:

There were real psychological theories of the self beginning to emerge in the nineteenth century, which were developmental as well as empirical, but they were not emerging in Britain. British theorists, having brushed aside or in most cases never even heard of Hazlitt's developmental psychology, were still torturing themselves over grounds for personal identity, rather than considering how a concept of self is actually acquired. (*Naturalization*, 165)

It is typical of contemporary naturalistic views that they reject the existence of any sharp line between philosophy and psychology. However, Martin and Barresi strongly criticize a number of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century philosophers (Hume and Hazlitt among them) for blurring the line between philosophical and psychological issues. In this respect, their understanding of what constitutes a naturalized approach to the self seems influenced by assumptions from analytic philosophy that are actually fairly hostile to naturalism.

Martin and Barresi also do not clearly articulate how the prominence of the fission examples in the eighteenth-century literature on personal identity is related to the trend towards naturalization, even when naturalization is construed fairly narrowly. While there are striking parallels between these eighteenth-century arguments and contemporary ones, neither in the eighteenth century nor in our own are they part of a distinctively naturalist, or even empiricist, approach to the mind. For, with the exception of the discussion of the split brain cases in the twentieth-century literature, the examples of fission are imaginary—not science, but science fiction. Experiments in the imagination are not, after all, experiments. They do not add to our experience. This is not to say, of course, that consideration of such patently fictional examples has no place in philosophy. The appeal to puzzle cases, however, is one of the methodologies that separates philosophy from the natural sciences. And, to the extent that a priori considerations are used to reject developments such as materialism, their use undermines a commitment to naturalism. Of course, in the eighteenth century this is exactly how the fission examples were used—as a *reductio ad absurdum* of the Lockean and other relational views.⁵

Martin and Barresi's assessment of the philosophers who participated in the discussion of personal identity in the second half of the eighteenth century reflects the lack of specific criteria for tracking the emergence of naturalism. The bases for some of their interpretations are clear, but others are not. David Hartley was a dualist, but his philosophy reflects a naturalism toward the mind not simply because he offered a physiologically based account of association, but because his acceptance of the possibility that matter might think reflected a secular outlook. I was puzzled, however, by Martin and Barresi's interpretation of the positions of Tucker and Reid. They write of Tucker, who embraced Clarke's view that the self is simple and immaterial, that he was "too committed to an empirical methodology to accept Clarke's theories for a priori reasons" (*Naturalization*, 115). The arguments that they cite in support of this, however, are not empirical (not even in the eighteenth century introspective sense), but drawn, like some of Clarke's, from an analysis of the concept of moral agency. Tucker argued that without an immaterial soul, there is no immortality, and without immortality, no guarantee that evil will receive the punishment it deserves. The soul must be immaterial, because (he presumed) morality required it. It is hard to see empirical methodology at work here. Martin and Barresi's analysis of Reid's position is similarly perplexing. They hold that Reid "tried on empirical grounds to justify believing in a distinct mental or spiritual realm, not reducible to the material" and they characterize Reid as "an exemplary empirical methodologist" (*Naturalization*, 123). They immediately go on to present Reid's criticism

of Hume's account of the mind as a succession of related ideas and impressions. They state: "Reid pointed out that on this view of mind, all agency is lost" (*Naturalization*, 124). This is, of course, just Clarke's a priori argument again. It is not clear, from Martin and Barresi's discussion, how an empirical methodology plays any role in this part of Reid's position. The examples of Tucker and Reid, whose works were published in the second half of the eighteenth century, do not demonstrate, as Martin and Barresi maintain, that Butler's death in 1752 marks "the end of an era in which religion had dominated the philosophy of human nature" (*Naturalization*, 79).

I cite these particular examples because the topic of moral agency, which figures prominently in both, presented the greatest stumbling block to the development of a naturalistic understanding of the self. Few British philosophers in the eighteenth century undertook to challenge Clarke's argument that moral responsibility and the immateriality of the soul were inextricably linked. Indeed, it is one of the most interesting contributions of Martin and Barresi's work that they clearly document the surprising continued influence of Clarke's arguments right through the end of the eighteenth century, even as empirical approaches to other aspects of the study of the mind may have been gaining strength.

Martin and Barresi are quite clear that the concept of the *soul* had had a role to play in moral theory. In particular, it had been used to explain both the legitimacy of holding a person responsible for acts performed at an earlier time, and the basis for a person's concern for the future. But should the *naturalized soul*, the self, be expected to play the same role? Clarke (and the philosophers who embraced his arguments) thought that if the simple, identical, self was a fiction then moral responsibility would be fictional too. The deep challenge for naturalist accounts of the self, therefore, was to construct a plausible and defensible moral theory, without the foundation of the simple self.

Naturalism about the self in this fuller sense was very rare: when it is taken into account, progress towards a naturalized conception of the self in the eighteenth century seems much less steady, and the dominant trend may actually be a persistent resistance to naturalism. This, to my mind, makes the work of the defenders of this fuller form of naturalism all the more interesting and important. Hazlitt's argument that moral theory is better off if the self is a fiction—less hampered by false assumptions about the primacy of self interest—illustrates one way that a naturalistic account of the self could give rise to a new moral theory. Martin and Barresi are quite right that Hazlitt's *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* deserves much more attention than it has yet received. But 65 years before Hazlitt, Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* had not only argued for a relational account of the self, but had also

developed an account of self concern and moral responsibility based upon it. Like Hazlitt, Hume rejected the position that the identity of a simple substance mattered for morality. In what follows I will argue that Hume's account of the self is less skeptical, more coherent, and more fully naturalistic, than Martin and Barresi recognize.

Hume's Naturalism About the Self

I was happy to discover that Martin and Barresi did not commit what I would consider to be the cardinal sin of Hume scholarship in relation to the topic of personal identity: they did not confine their interpretation of Hume's view to what Hume wrote in Book I of the *Treatise*. In the light of the overall theme of *Naturalization of the Soul*, however, it is surprising that they do not comment on Hume's arguments in *Treatise* 1.4.5, "Of the immateriality of the soul." In this section, which immediately precedes his famous discussion of personal identity and leads into it, Hume argues that perceptions cannot inhere in any substance, either material or immaterial, because some of our perceptions are actually extended (T 1.4.5.15, 1.4.5.33; SBN 239–40, 250). Hume also argued that

we find by comparing their ideas, that thought and motion are different from each other, and by experience, that they are constantly united; which being all the circumstances, that enter into the ideas of cause and effect . . . we may certainly conclude, that motion may be, and actually is, the cause of thought and perception. (T 1.4.5.30: SBN 248)

Hume remarks a little later that this "gives the advantage to the materialists above their antagonists" (T 1.4.5.32; SBN 250). Attention to *Treatise* 1.4.5 shows that *prior* to the discussion of personal identity, in which Hume challenges the claims of those philosophers who assert that they have an idea of the self as simple and immaterial, Hume had already argued that the soul is not a substance of any kind, that perceptions are diverse in their nature, and that experience shows us that matter can be the cause of thought. These views give priority to experience over dogmatic assumptions from religion, clearly reflecting a naturalist's attitude.⁶ Hume is not, as Martin and Barresi maintain, an "immaterialist about everything" (*Naturalization*, 124) and even in Book 1 of the *Treatise* his arguments concerning the self are not merely part of a foundationalist project about the origin of ideas.

I will not take the time here to review the very familiar argument concerning personal identity that Hume presents in *Treatise* 1.4.6, "Of personal

identity.” Building on his argument in “Of the immateriality of the soul,” Hume argued that “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” (T 1.4.6.19; SBN 261). We have no impression of a simple, identical self, and, in fact, the mind has “no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different” (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 253). “The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one” (T1.4.6.15; SBN 259). Hume distinguished, however, between “personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination” and personal identity “as it regards our passions, or the concern we take in ourselves” (T 1.4.6.5, 1.4.6.19; SBN 253, 261). Only the first, he says, is his subject in Book 1. This clearly indicates that Hume did not take the account of personal identity in Book 1 of the *Treatise* to be complete.

Martin and Barresi see a significant inconsistency between Hume’s arguments in Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*. “After roundly denouncing in Book 1 of the *Treatise* the idea that we have an impression of a ‘simple and continu’d self,’ in Book 2 Hume declared that we not only have some sort of impression of self but one that is more vivid and constant than any other impression we have” (*Naturalization*, 150). For Martin and Barresi, this marks the broad incompatibility of what they take to be Hume’s skeptical philosophical projects in Book I and the more constructive psychological projects of Book 2. As I have already indicated, I think it is a part of Hume’s naturalism that he did not distinguish in the Martin and Barresi’s strict fashion between philosophy and psychology. This is not a mistake, unless naturalism itself is a mistaken approach. But, as a matter of fact, Hume does connect the idea of the self he appeals to in Book 2 with the discussion in Book 1 of personal identity. At the beginning of Book 2 of the *Treatise*, as Hume introduces his account of the indirect passion of pride, he wrote:

’Tis evident, that pride and humility, tho’ directly contrary, have yet 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 2.1.2.2; SBN 277)

and slightly later in the same section:

But tho’ that connected succession of perceptions, which we call *self*, be always the object of these two passions, ’tis impossible it can be their cause. (T 2.1.2.3; SBN 277).

Book 1 had argued that the only idea we have of the self is of a succession of related ideas and impressions. That is the idea of the self that has a role to play in Book 2.

Hume linked the topic of personal identity as it regards the passions to the topic of *self-concern*. As I have argued elsewhere,⁷ Book 2 of the *Treatise*, “Of the Passions,” presents Hume’s explanation of why a person now, who is not identical to either a past self or a future self, still feels responsibility for past actions and an interest in future ones. *Very* briefly, passions are a type of impression. Book 2 extends the account of the association of ideas presented in Book 1 to impressions. The passions of pride, humility, love, and hatred are generated by a double association of impressions and ideas. Book 2 also develops accounts of sympathy and comparison that place the passions in a social context. Hume’s account of a person’s concern with her past and her future draws on all these elements. The complex system of perceptions that constitutes (for example) my present self is connected by relations of resemblance and causation to various past actions, thoughts and perceptions. This fact of connectedness is what makes those past perceptions mine, but it is also what gives them a role to play in the generation of feelings like pride and shame. Similarly, to think of myself in the future is to think of the actions that follow from my motives, intention and character. Sympathy, whose basic operation is to explain the communication of feeling among persons, also explains why I care about a future person who is not identical to myself. For Hume, as for Hazlitt later, and Parfit much later, concern with oneself in the future and concern with others, therefore, differ in degree, not kind.

Book 2 of the *Treatise* completes Hume’s account of the self, providing a basis for moral agency without appealing to the simplicity of the self. In this way, Hume gave a fully naturalistic rebuttal of Clarke’s a priori arguments that moral agency requires the existence of a simple, immaterial soul that remains identical throughout the course of a person’s life.

Understanding the *Treatise* in the way I have just described indicates that Martin and Barresi’s depiction of a gradual movement in the eighteenth century towards the naturalization of the soul needs some revision. An account of a completely naturalized soul, the Humean self, was available by 1740. The *Treatise* may not have received the acclaim Hume hoped for, but it was read—and objected to. Fifteen years later, Hume decided not to publish his essay “On the Immortality of the Soul,” which argued that there were no metaphysical, moral or physical grounds for the belief in the soul’s immortality: he thought it would be imprudent, and he was very likely correct.⁸

Conclusion

According to Martin and Barresi, the naturalization of the soul that took place in the eighteenth century led to the split between philosophy and scientific psychology. Contemporary philosophical discussions of personal identity address conceptual questions about the self, psychology addresses empirical ones. The study of the self has been fragmented, they argue, and there is no going back. I think Martin and Barresi are mistaken on this point. Analytic philosophy's turn away from natural science occurred at the end of the nineteenth century: it was not inevitable and it is not irreversible. Martin and Barresi's valuable book gives us many reasons to read (or re-read) the philosophers of the eighteenth century who played a role in the naturalization of the soul. If we need one more reason, it might be this: to be reminded of the viability of their naturalist project.⁹

NOTES

Raymond Martin and John Barresi. *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century*. New York and London: Routledge, 1999. Pp. 216. ISBN 0415216451; cloth, \$95.00.

1 David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) 1.4.6.15; SBN 259. All references to the *Treatise* are to this edition, and indicate the book, part, section number and paragraph of the material cited, preceded by T. For the convenience of the reader, page numbers will also be given to the following edition, preceded by SBN: David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, 2nd ed., revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1978).

2 Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal Identity in the Eighteenth Century* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999), 1. Future references will be given in the body of the paper, cited as *Naturalization*.

3 I am, perhaps, being more definite on this point than Martin and Barresi are—see their comment on 19.

4 Martin and Barresi interpret Hume's position as largely skeptical, and find the role he gives to the idea of the self in Book 2 of the *Treatise* inconsistent with the arguments of Book 1. I have more to say about this below.

5 Martin and Barresi recognize, of course, that the fission examples were primarily used by substance theorists against relational accounts of personal identity (see 162–3). They express some surprise that the discussion of fission itself did not lead more quickly to the view that personal identity does not matter.

6 I have argued elsewhere that the argument in “Of the Immateriality of the Soul” shows Hume’s familiarity with the Clarke’s arguments. See Jane L. McIntyre, “Hume: Second Newton of the Moral Sciences,” *Hume Studies* 20 (1994): 3–18.

7 Jane L. McIntyre, “Personal Identity and the Passions,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 27 (1989): 545–57.

8 For further discussion of the publication history of Hume’s suppressed essays, see E.C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), chapter 24.

9 This paper was originally presented as part of an “Author Meets the Critics” session at the American Philosophical Association Pacific Division meetings, San Francisco, March 2003. The other critics were Donald Ainslie and Marya Schectman.

