



Donald M. Baxter. *Hume's Difficulty: Time and Identity in the Treatise*

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Hume Studies Volume 33, Number 2, (2007) pp. 352–357.

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Donald L. M. Baxter. *Hume's Difficulty: Time and Identity in the Treatise*. London: Routledge, 2007. Pp. x + 129. ISBN 9780415955942, Cloth, \$95.00.

In this densely argued study of Hume on the problem of identity through time, Donald L. M. Baxter spotlights two relatively neglected independent problems concerning identity in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*. These are the challenges of understanding Hume on (1) the persistence of individuals over time, in a metaphysics according to which only individuals as indivisible entities exist; and (2) the possibility of conceiving that identical objects might possibly be non-identical, or conversely. Baxter implies that Hume's greatest contribution in this area may have been to remark a difficulty that has yet to be satisfactorily resolved, but which the metaphysics of individuals needs in some way to accommodate.

The book is divided into an introduction, six chapters, and conclusion, followed by notes, bibliography and combined name and subject index. The chapters discuss: 1. Interpreting Hume as metaphysician and skeptic; 2. Moments and durations; 3. Steadfast objects; 4. Identity; 5. Representing personal identity; 6. Systematic exposition of Hume's difficulty. In a remarkably compact presentation, Baxter goes a great distance toward explaining the relation between Hume's treatment of identity and his theory of time as an abstraction from successions of experienced events, and of moments understood as indivisible temporal units. I think that in arriving at his final conclusions Baxter is entirely on the right track when he argues that Hume's discussion of self and the problem of self identity in the *Treatise* Appendix is a direct outcome of what he describes as Hume's difficulty concerning the problem of intelligibly imagining that an object or several objects are both possibly identical and possibly distinct. Hume himself despairs of resolving the problem, and Baxter also seems satisfied to recognize its insuperability. Perhaps, however, as I later suggest, Hume and Baxter both fail to see a perfectly adequate solution right before their eyes, by drawing a distinction to which Baxter calls attention and for which he provides a useful terminology.

I am very much at home with Baxter's characterization of Hume as a kind of metaphysician, despite the book-burning polemics of *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* (EHU 12.3.11; SBN 165). I never thought Hume really meant to advocate destroying these kinds of texts anyway, but was indulging in a bit of exaggeration for rhetorical effect. I agree entirely with Baxter that Hume in the inflammatory passage is attacking a certain kind of objectionable Scholastic metaphysics. I note with Baxter that Hume himself develops and defends an extensive network of empirically-grounded metaphysical commitments in both the *Treatise* and the first *Enquiry*. I am also on the same page with Baxter's portrait of

Hume as primarily concerned with the origin of ideas rather than the definition or analysis of concepts, and, in short, with Baxter's useful description of Hume as a Pyrrhonian skeptical empiricist. This is certainly the Hume I know, though I thought it useful to have Baxter's own interpretative assumptions laid out clearly and argued for persuasively in the book's first chapter.

Despite admiring Baxter's ambitious project and overall agreement with his methodology and certain aspects of his conclusions, I found myself dissatisfied with many of his key arguments. Here is what I see as some of the main difficulties, beginning first with the problem of understanding Hume on genidentity in the sense of the persistence of things through time.

Baxter sympathetically defends Hume's commitment to Nicolas de Malezieu's reasoning concerning the nonexistence of divisible things against an uncharitable barrage of criticisms raised, among others, by Antony Flew. After quoting T 1.2.2.4 (SBN 31), Baxter concludes that, "as seen in the Malezieu argument, anything divisible is really many things. So durations and successions are really many things. The things in time are either temporal simples or temporal complexes. Only the former are single things; only the latter have duration" (Baxter, 29). I have no quarrel with Baxter's interpretation of Hume on this score, or with Hume's appropriation of Malezieu's argument, which Hume describes as "strong and beautiful" (T 1.2.2.3; SBN 30), nor with Baxter's recognition that Hume extends Malezieu's general considerations about the metaphysics of part-whole relations to time and moments of time in particular, when Hume remarks immediately thereafter, "All this reasoning takes place with regard to time" (T 1.2.2.4; SBN 31).

The complication I see is rather in the use Baxter then proceeds to make of Hume's claim that, as a result, anything consisting of parts exists only equivocally "with some truth." If this is correct, as Baxter argues Hume fully believes, then the implication that simples alone are real raises a serious difficulty for the concept of *coexisting* moments that is crucial to Baxter's solution to the problem of understanding Hume's account of genidentity. The concept of coexisting is thereby made hopelessly ineffectual in this context, precisely where Baxter needs and tries to draw upon it. Baxter argues that Hume understands the temporal duration of individuals persisting identically through time as existing at a single moment that coexists with successive moments. The problem, if I understand Baxter correctly, is that Hume allows there to be indivisible moments of unequal temporal extent. His diagram at the top of page 37 indicates this, where we see a section of brick wall in which the bricks are all of the same thickness but of different lengths. Steadfast objects are those that, as individuals, exist at moments represented by longer bricks, enduring for a length of time as they coexist with several other moments represented by shorter bricks. I think the whole idea of coexistent moments is bizarre, but let that pass; it is a point Baxter addresses,

although I did not fully understand his attempts to dispel confusion about the possibility. The greater stumbling block (pun intended) for me is that I cannot (as yet, at least) make good sense of the proposal that coexistent moments can be both individually indivisible and unequal in length.

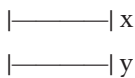
I keep returning stubbornly to the conviction that if one moment coexists with another moment that extends beyond it—before or after—in time, then the further extended moment must be divisible into distinct parts at least in principle to the extent that it overlaps any shorter moment with which it is paired and compared. If one of the moments is divisible, unfortunately, then, according to Hume’s appropriation of Malezieu’s argument, the divisible putative moment does not really exist as such, because it is not really a unity, where only unitary things exist. At best, such a moment exists, as Baxter himself puts it, only “with some truth.” If such a putative moment does not really exist, however, because it is not unitary but divisible, then how and in what sense can it intelligibly *coexist* with anything at all? A moment supposedly coexisting with a succession of moments must be divisible into at least as many temporal parts as are marked by the endpoints of the successive moments alongside which it is arranged in time. Baxter remarks: “[Hume’s] is a peculiar view, admittedly. Moments can coexist. Some moments are longer than others” (38).

It is passing strange to think of moments as having time-occurrences or parameters as part of their internal property complements, rather than the succession of moments as itself constituting time. Perhaps this is Hume’s idea, after all, but I did not discover enough documentation in Baxter’s exposition to satisfy my doubts that this really must be so. Baxter, in fact, quotes Hume as saying: “’Tis certain then, that time, as it exists, must be compos’d of indivisible moments” (T 1.2.2.4; SBN 31). Baxter’s definition of coexisting moments is also puzzling. At first he claims that “Coexistence is taken to be primitive” (37). Two pages later, however, he explicitly defines it as follows, in the context of formalizing his account of unequal indivisible coexistent moments in order to demonstrate the account’s logical consistency. Now “The primitive relation is the later-than relation, represented by ‘>’” (38). With this relation, Baxter defines, for a domain of moments: “Definition of Coexists-With: 4. $x@y = \text{df. } \sim(x > y) \ \& \ \sim(y > x)$ (By definition, x coexists with y if and only if it is not the case that x is later than y and it is not the case that y is later than x)” (39). What Baxter evidently means by the coexistence of moments is something like their partial overlapping existence in time, as long as neither moment is “later” than the other. Still, it is not entirely clear even what Baxter means by “later” in this context. Is it x ’s (or y ’s) starting point that must not be later than y ’s (x ’s)? Or is it rather x ’s (y ’s) end point that must not be later than y ’s (x ’s)? In the first case, we can have:



While in the latter case we can have the opposite, second (right-most), situation, but not the first (left-most).

Now, I would say that x and y do not coexist *simpliciter* if there is *any* interval of time at which x exists and y does not or at which y exists and x does not. They might overlap, as do non-twin brothers born at different times who happen to die no later than one another, but it seems strained to hold that they coexist if there is a period of time at which both do not exist. Extending Baxter's notation, I would therefore define the relation "earlier than" in terms of the (properly disambiguated) primitive relation "later than" in this way: $x < y = \text{df. } \sim(x > y) \ \& \ \sim(x = y)$. Then I would define coexistence as $x@y = \text{df. } \sim(x > y) \ \& \ \sim(y > x) \ \& \ \sim(x < y) \ \& \ \sim(y < x)$. Only in that case do we obtain, in the full sense of the word, coexistence:



Of course, Baxter must maintain that there is no interval of *time* at which not both x and y exist, for then either x or y would be divisible by precisely that difference in time that separates the extent of their respective durations. Again, to the extent that I understand what Baxter is proposing, this implies something that I consider rather bizarre and for which I see no evidence in Hume, that there must be different times for moments of different indivisible sizes. Hume, as we have just seen, says that time is "compos'd of . . . moments," so it is hard to see how there could be different times made up of differently sized indivisible moments, nor is it clear in what sense we could either intelligibly compare such moments as being different in size, unless they were all in some fashion simultaneous, as the term "coexistent" already suggests, or conclude that one indivisible moment endures as a persistent entity over another stretch of time, as Baxter's solution to this first problem in Hume's metaphysics of identity and time requires. Still, we must wonder, because he makes no effort to explain, why Baxter disallows coexistent moments to be later than one another (whatever he exactly means by this), rather than no earlier than one another.

Hume, in another passage Baxter quotes, insists that: "whatever is extended consists of parts" (T 1.4.5.7; SBN 234). A moment of time of greater duration than another moment would appear to be extended, and hence divisible, hence not a unity, and hence not existent, except in the way that a crowd of people is a qualified unity "with some truth" (Baxter, 26–7). Baxter makes the only move here that his interpretive commitments allow, which is stoutly to maintain: "something without temporal parts can coexist with a temporal succession. But something without spatial parts cannot be located along a spatial succession. So time is very unlike space" (41). This is true for Hume only if Baxter's interpretation of Hume's solution to the problem of understanding the persistence of things through durations of time is correct. Confronting this reading of Hume, however, is Hume's own assertion with respect to Malezieu's argument that inaugurates this discussion

for Baxter, that all of Malezieu's reasoning with respect to space applies equally to time, in which Hume seems to treat the part-whole relations in the metaphysics of space and time precisely on a par.

Hume's difficulty, as Baxter characterizes it, is a kind of precursor and counterpart to, but still significantly different than, what has come to be known as Frege's puzzle. Indeed, I suspect that Baxter devised the phrase "Hume's difficulty," which to my knowledge has not previously occurred in the secondary literature, precisely to echo and evoke the partial parallelism with Frege's puzzle, which uncoincidentally, as especially the opening and concluding sections of Frege's 1892 essay *Über Sinn und Bedeutung* testify, is also concerned with the correct understanding of identity and the language in which identity relations are expressed. Baxter describes Hume's difficulty in these terms: "we can be unsure whether or not two things are identical, and can consistently imagine them—the same them—either way" (83). Frege's puzzle, so designated by Nathan Salmon and other commentators, is the problem of understanding how it is that an identity statement can be both true and informative. These are different philosophical riddles, to be sure, but, more importantly, Hume's puzzle is different from and independent of Hume's problem of identity through time, which occupies Baxter in the earlier chapters of his book.

Baxter's title and subtitle make it seem as though the two themes of Hume's difficulty and the problem of identity over time in the *Treatise* were intimately interrelated or to be surprisingly interconnected by Baxter's elucidation. No such linkage is ventured, however; indeed, Baxter asserts the very opposite. Summarizing the contents of each preceding chapter in the book's Conclusion, Baxter writes: "'Systematic Exposition of Hume's Difficulty,' shows that the apparent contradiction Hume finds in the concept of identity is independent of his assumption that identity is identity through time and is independent of his idiosyncratic views about steadfast objects and duration" (97). I was unsettled, then, as to why Baxter chose to juxtapose two such different problems of identity.

In order to consider the possibility that two possibly different objects might also be one, Hume believes, we run into trouble, trying to imagine that the objects in question both have and do not have all the same properties, as the identity conditions for entities seem to require. I think that Baxter is definitely pointing in the right direction, distinguishing between the intentional (subjective) and intended (objective) object of such imaginings. Baxter nevertheless seems entirely too pessimistic about the prospects of solving Hume's problem, when he laments: "The best contemporary accounts, for all their merits in solving other problems, do not address this one" (97).

I wonder, first of all, whether Baxter has looked at the best contemporary phenomenological approaches to this kind of problem, many of them inspired by early Austrian intentionality theory. Why not say that in asking whether two objects might possibly be one we are asking whether different intentional object

conceptions in fact intend the same or different intended objects? Might my amiable neighbor be a professor of German? The intentional object I imagine as my neighbor is incomplete. I do not hold before the mind all of my neighbor's properties, but only a selection. I leave it open whether or not the intended object related to my intentional object of thought has or does not have the property of being a German professor. If I do not know whether or not the neighbor teaches German, then I can remain indefinitely in a state of epistemic and imaginative suspense. It is true enough that the same intended object cannot possibly both be imagined to be possibly identical and possibly not identical to a certain German professor. Imagination, however, has to do with intentional rather than intended objects, on Baxter's distinction, and intentional objects are often incomplete in their property ascriptions or characterizations in just the way needed to allow imaginative consideration that two incomplete intentional objects might be completed as one intended object, or one incomplete intentional object might be completed as two distinct intended objects.

If we indicate the properties of incomplete intentional objects, existing only within our imaginations, as enclosed in angle brackets, $\langle \rangle$, and the properties of intended objects as enclosed in square brackets, $[\]$, then we can intelligibly describe both our imagining two incomplete intentional objects for the amiable neighbor $\langle a, n \rangle$ and the German professor $\langle g, p \rangle$ to converge in one identical person as intended object with a complete property complement $[a, n, g, p, \dots]$. The fact that intentional object $\langle a, n \rangle \neq \langle g, p \rangle$ does not prevent it from being true that the intended object of both $\langle a, n \rangle$ and $\langle g, p \rangle$ is a single individual combining all four of these properties. We can similarly describe the divergence of our single incomplete intentional object for the neighbor man who is also a German professor $\langle a, n, g, p \rangle$ into what may turn out to be two distinct non-identical individuals as complete intended objects, $[a, n, \dots]$ and $[g, p, \dots]$. Of course, in both such scenarios the assumption is all along that our intentionality has played us false, and the real intended referential objects of our imaginings are different than as we had imagined. Baxter may be right that Hume's difficulty was unsolved by Hume in his time, but I am less certain about whether to agree with Hume and Baxter that the problem itself is quite so intractable.

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