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# Skeptical Realism and Hume on the Self

TONY PITSON

*Abstract:* The skeptical realist interpretation of Hume has in recent years become the focus of considerable debate. Many of the arguments both for and against this approach to Hume—in particular, regarding his view of causal power and also the continued and distinct existence of body—have been well rehearsed and explored in the literature. So far, however, the possibility of applying the skeptical realist approach to Hume’s discussion of the self in “Of Personal Identity” (T 1.4.6) has not received the same critical attention. In light of the distinctive issues that arise in this context, I shall, in the following, address the skeptical realist interpretation of Hume on the self provided by recent commentators like Edward Craig and Galen Strawson. I attempt to show that there are particular problems with this approach to Hume on the self, and I defend the alternative rejected by it, namely, that Hume presents his bundle or system view in *Treatise* 1.4.6 as an ontological claim about the nature of the mind or self. I further place this understanding of Hume within the wider context of his views about the different aspects of personal identity and the nature of the mind’s relation to body.

Ourself, independent of the perception of every other object,  
is in reality nothing.

—David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*

## Introduction

An issue which has become prominent in recent discussions of Hume on personal identity (T 1.4.6)<sup>1</sup> concerns the nature of the account to be found there of the mind or self.<sup>2</sup> Hume famously rejects the idea of the self as something perfectly identical and simple in favor of the view that each of us is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement” (T 1.4.6.4; SBN 252). On the face of it, Hume endorses here a metaphysical claim about what the self *is*, namely, that it is a bundle of perceptions rather than something separate to which the perceptions belong. And, indeed, this appears to be confirmed by a qualification to his comparison of the mind to a theatre in which our perceptions successively make their appearance; for he warns us against being misled by this into thinking of the mind as a kind of place or thing where these perceptions occur. “They are the successive perceptions only,” he writes here, “that constitute the mind.”

The question of how to understand the negative ontological claims that Hume appears to make at a number of places in Book 1 of the *Treatise* is the focus of what has become known as the “New Hume Debate.” Take, for example, Hume’s characterization of causal necessity: “upon the whole, necessity is something that exists in the mind, not in objects; nor is it possible for us ever to form the most distant idea of it, consider’d as a quality of bodies” (T 1.3.14.22; SBN 165–66). Objects themselves exhibit relations like contiguity and succession; it is in this respect that they operate independently of the mind and give rise to the impression of determination from which the idea of necessary connection is derived (T 1.3.14.24–31; SBN 166–70). It is natural to interpret Hume as saying here that causation consists objectively in the constant conjunction of certain objects and that any additional notion of necessity reflects the way in which the imagination responds to this relation. Or, again, take what Hume says about externally existing objects or bodies: for example, “The farthest we can go towards a conception of external objects, when suppos’d *specifically* different from our perceptions, is to form a relative idea of them, without pretending to comprehend the related objects” (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68; Hume’s emphasis). Of course, we do ordinarily think of objects themselves as existing independently of our perceptions, but Hume is apparently calling into question whether we can really make sense of the supposed difference between them (see T 1.4.5.19; SBN 241). Should we, then, read Hume as denying that causal necessity obtains among objects themselves or even that there *are* objects in addition to the perceptions which apparently reveal them to us? According to the “New Humeans,” the answer in each case is an emphatic “No”: Hume is committed both to the existence of objective necessary connections and also to the external or independent existence of objects themselves. In these respects Hume is to be considered a realist, but also a skeptic who would refrain

from any claim to knowledge of the ultimate nature of bodies and their causal powers. Hence the label for this interpretation of “skeptical realism.”<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I am not directly concerned with the extensive debate about the skeptical realist view of causal necessity or of external existence (though I will say something later about Hume’s position on the existence of body in light of the account of the self that I ascribe to him in opposition to the skeptical realist one). My interest is, instead, with the attempt to apply this kind of interpretation to the particular case of Hume on the self. I shall argue that in this context, at least, the skeptical realist view is mistaken and that Hume really is committed to an account of the self as a bundle of perceptions (rather than as something distinct from our perceptions). This will require me to meet the objection that Hume’s skepticism prevents him from making an ontological or metaphysical claim of this kind. I shall also attempt to show that Hume can explain the causally dependent nature of our perceptions without resorting to a “realist” view of the self. First, however, there are important questions as to how we should understand the bundle theory considered as an account of the self.

### **Hume’s Bundle Theory**

Hume presents his theory as an alternative to a certain kind of philosophical view of the self. The use of the term “self” in this context, however, stands in need of some explanation, especially given that Hume appears to employ it interchangeably with both “mind” and “person.”<sup>4</sup> Hume is sometimes taken to be using “self” and “person” in T 1.4.6 to refer to the mind rather than to the whole person.<sup>5</sup> A complicating factor is that Hume’s criticisms of what is said by “some philosophers” about the self (T 1.4.6.1–3; SBN 251–52) might be taken to suggest that he is questioning whether there *is* such a thing as the self. It is important, though, to note Hume’s qualifying remark, that we have no idea of the self “after the manner it is here explain’d” (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251)—in other words, as something whose “perfect identity and simplicity” is revealed to us in consciousness. This does not prevent Hume from recognizing that there is such a thing as awareness of one’s self as a “succession of related ideas and impressions” (T 2.1.2.2; SBN 277) in accordance with the bundle theory of T 1.4.6.

We should recognize that the apparent ambiguities in Hume’s use of the term “self” reflect his distinction between “personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves” (T 1.4.6.5; SBN 253). While in the former case an attempt might be made to provide an account of the self or person by reference to the mind and its perceptions, in the latter case we cannot ignore the complex relations in which persons are involved and which clearly reflect their bodily as well as mental features. There is at least one dimension of personal identity in which the self is essentially embodied, and

reference to its ideas and impressions will be insufficient to capture what it is for a self to exist. But personal identity in regard to “thought or imagination” has to do with the more purely subjective aspects of the self, those relating to the mind.

In “Of the Immateriality of the Soul” (T 1.4.5)—a section which should be read in conjunction with T 1.4.6—Hume provides his own account of the relation between mind and body, one according to which the existence of mind is dependent on that of body. This is not to say that he is straightforwardly materialist about the mind. To the extent that “the question concerning the substance of the soul is absolutely unintelligible” (T 1.4.5.33; SBN 250), Hume repudiates materialist as well as immaterialist theories of the mind or soul. But he distinguishes the question of the substance of mind from that of the cause of its thought, and so far as the latter is concerned, Hume argues that this consists in certain kinds of material motion (T 1.4.5.30; SBN 248). The fact that there is strong evidence favoring this causal hypothesis “gives the advantage to the materialists above their antagonists” (T 1.4.5.32; SBN 250). Immaterialists “conjoin thought with a simple and indivisible substance” (T 1.4.5.15; SBN 239). Hume has, however, already argued in this section that we are unable to form any satisfactory notion of substance, and that if “substance” is defined as “*something which may exist by itself,*” then this applies to whatever may be clearly conceived to exist, including even our perceptions (T 1.4.5.5; SBN 233). But since “to consider the matter *a priori*, any thing may produce any thing,” there is nothing to prevent us from accepting that “matter and motion may often be regarded as the causes of thought” (T 1.4.5.30, 33; SBN 247, 250). So, while materialism is mistaken in so far as it attempts to conjoin thought with extended material substance, it does make an intelligible and sustainable claim about the causes of thought. Thus, since we have evidence that the mind is causally dependent on the body, and we have no idea of the substance of the mind or soul, we may conclude with Hume that if our perceptions are removed by our bodily dissolution, then we will be “entirely annihilated” (T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252).<sup>6</sup>

The point that different notions of the self reflect the different aspects of personal identity with which Hume is concerned bears upon the skeptical realist view of his position. One important line of argument in support of this view as it applies to the self is that there must be more to the self, where the notion of a self is equivalent to the notion of a person, than a bundle of perceptions. We can see from the above that there is no need for Hume to deny this. On the one hand, he is offering in T 1.4.6 an account of personal identity which appeals to non-bodily features, but as we have seen, Hume recognizes that these features have no existence apart from the body. So even if the self in this context is to be identified with the mind, this is not to say that this is all there is to being a person. On the other hand, Hume recognizes that we may also approach issues of personal identity from a perspective which requires us to refer directly to bodily appearance and

behavior. Thus, in his discussion of pride and humility, for example, Hume notes that these passions are not confined to the mind and its qualities but also extend to such bodily features as strength, agility and manual dexterity (T 2.1.2.5; SBN 279). From this perspective, where the passions and self-concern are involved, it is clear that a person is more than a bundle of perceptions.

What, then, of the bundle theory itself? How are we to understand the claim that the mind—or the self in so far as it is identified with the mind or soul—is “a bundle or collection of different perceptions”? Should this be read as a reductionist account of the mind or self? If so, what form of reductionism is involved? So far as the latter question is concerned, we may distinguish between two ways of reading Hume’s alternative to the view of the mind or self as a kind of substance to which our perceptions belong. On one of these, what is involved is an analytic claim about the meaning of a statement like “I am in pain,” namely, that it may be translated without loss of meaning into a statement about the occurrence within a certain bundle of perceptions of a distinctive impression of sensation. This, however, would surely be a somewhat anachronistic way of understanding Hume’s account of the mind, as it would be also to take his remarks about bodies in the *Treatise*—for example, “’Tis confest by the most judicious philosophers, that our ideas of bodies are nothing but collections form’d by the mind of the ideas of . . . distinct sensible qualities” (T 1.4.3.2; (SBN 219)—as part of a phenomenalist program for translating statements about physical objects into statements about experiences.

The apparent alternative is to take Hume’s claim about the mind or self as a bundle of perceptions as one according to which this is, as a matter of fact, what it is for something to be a mind or self. The contrast here is between what might be described as a *logical* interpretation of Hume’s bundle theory, according to which he is offering an analysis of the idea of a mind, and a *psychological* one, which provides a contrast with both the received philosophical view of the self as a substance as well as the ordinary belief in the self as something simple and unified.<sup>7</sup> The latter seems to reflect Hume’s approach to the idea of self: that is, by seeing what happens when we look inward at ourselves. If Hume is right, all that we observe in this case is perceptions, and we never observe anything further to which they might be supposed to belong.<sup>8</sup>

There is a further question to be addressed in this context to do with the way in which any form of reductionism about the self should be understood. It might be thought that Hume’s claim that the mind is a bundle of perceptions is tantamount to the denial that there is such a thing as the mind or self.<sup>9</sup> Hume has, indeed, been credited with a “no-self” account, one which may be thought to bear comparison with the Buddhist view of the self.<sup>10</sup> There is a parallel here with the distinction that has been drawn between two different forms of materialism: reductive and eliminative. The distinction itself may be considered somewhat problematic, but

the eliminative view is usually characterized as one according to which there are no mental states as they are ordinarily understood (that is, in accordance with “folk psychology”). The reductive view is that mental states may be identified, for example, with brain processes as the items to which ordinary words like “pain” and “belief” in fact refer. In these terms, the no-self interpretation of Hume should be considered eliminative rather than reductive, even if it retains the language of personal identity on pragmatic grounds. (There would then be a contrast with any more radical form of eliminativism which would argue for the replacement of our ordinary ways of talking about the self and its identity). It seems clear that while Hume regards our belief in personal identity as a fiction, he is far from advocating that the language of persons and their identity should, therefore, be abandoned. Indeed, even after presenting his claim in T 1.4.6.15 about the fiction involved in ascribing identity to “the mind of man,” Hume himself continues to speak in terms of “the same person” (T 1.4.6.19; SBN 261).

So far, then, we have found reason for supposing that Hume’s bundle theory is offered as a reductionist account of what the mind or the self in fact is. In this respect, he may be credited with a metaphysical claim about the nature of the mind or self, one which appeals to the category of perceptions (in Hume’s technical sense of this term, as referring to the mind’s contents) rather than substance.<sup>11</sup> This is not to say, however, that Hume’s primary concern in T 1.4.6 is metaphysical; rather, given the fact that the mind is a bundle of perceptions, his principal task is to explain our tendency to ascribe to it “a perfect identity” (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 254).<sup>12</sup> Hume assumes here an opposition between the ideas of identity and diversity and a similar assumption underlies his lengthy explanation in T 1.4.2 of our belief in body as something with a continuous and distinct existence (see especially T 1.4.2.25–34; SBN 200–204). This brings us to the heart of the topic with which I am mainly concerned. Does Hume’s bundle theory really amount to a claim about what the mind or the self is in opposition to the substance view that he apparently rejects? Or does Hume think that the self is, after all, something distinct from the perceptions which belong to it, even if the “true idea of the human mind” is that of “a system of different perceptions” (T 1.4.6.19; SBN 261)?

### **The Skeptical Realist View**

Perhaps the first philosopher—at least, in more recent discussions of Hume—to present what may be described as a skeptical realist interpretation of Hume on the self is Edward Craig. Craig begins by noting that Hume is often taken to view the mind as nothing more than a succession of perceptions (Craig, 111). But he points out that in at least some of the places where Hume appears to commit himself to such a view, there is the qualification that we have no *idea* (or *notion*) of the mind

distinct from its perceptions (for example, T 1.4.6.2, 4; SBN 251–53; T Appendix 18, 19; SBN 365).

Before we see what conclusions Craig draws from this, we might briefly consider what Hume means by this kind of qualification. For this purpose, a reference to the self that occurs in the Abstract of the *Treatise* is especially interesting. Hume mentions here an opinion “peculiar to himself,” that “the soul, as far as we can conceive it, is nothing but a train or system of different perceptions . . . all united together, but without any perfect simplicity or identity” (T Abstract 28; SBN 658). He contrasts this with Descartes’s “unintelligible” claim that thought in general is the essence of mind. From this Hume concludes that “it must be our several particular perceptions, that compose the mind. I say *compose* the mind, not *belong* to it. The mind is not a substance, in which the perceptions inhere” (T Abstract 28; SBN 657). He then finishes by saying that “our idea of any mind is only that of particular perceptions, without the notion of any thing we call substance, either simple or compound” (T Abstract 28; SBN 657). These remarks indicate that Hume’s claim about the only idea we are able to form of the mind has to do with what we are able to conceive or what is intelligible for us. Hume is saying that we cannot make sense of the supposition that the mind is anything more than its perceptions, even if we are nevertheless inclined to “imagine something unknown and mysterious” connecting these parts of the mind (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 254). Thus, while Hume sometimes reiterates his view of the mind as a succession of perceptions without any qualifying reference to our ideas or notions (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265; T Appendix 15, 17; SBN 263–65), we are presumably meant to assume that he is continuing to characterize what he takes to be the only intelligible conception or idea we are able to form of the mind.

Returning to Craig’s discussion, one of the passages to which he draws attention is the following: “Philosophers begin to be reconcil’d to the principle, *that we have no idea of external substance, distinct from the idea 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 Appendix 19; SBN 635, Hume’s emphasis). The problem Craig finds here is that the claim that we have no notion of something sits oddly with the claim that it does not exist (Craig, 114). For if there is no idea, then there can be no argument one way or the other, so on the question of existence we remain ignorant. A case in point, according to Craig, is Hume’s view of our ignorance of the power or energy which enables bodies to act on each other and the mind to operate on itself or on the body (EHU 7.25; SBN 72–73).<sup>13</sup> The fact that the force or energy is “entirely incomprehensible” to us in these cases is a reason for acknowledging our ignorance of this aspect of causation rather than for denying its existence.

Even if we accept this reading, there is still the question of whether the case of causation may be compared in this respect with that of the self. As Hume himself

observes, the first part of his argument in section 7 of the first *Enquiry* seems to be leading to the conclusion that we have no idea at all of connection or power (EHU 7.26; SBN 73–74). But he goes on to argue that it is possible to resist this conclusion by identifying an impression from which we form the idea of power or necessary connection, even if it is not one arising from any particular instance of cause and effect (EHU 7.27–28; SBN 74–75). In the case of the idea of the self as something distinct from its perceptions, on the other hand, Hume is quite clear that there *is* no corresponding impression—indeed, that there *could not* be any such impression (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251). The argument Hume provides here may be problematic, but there is no doubt as to the conclusion he draws from it. We have an idea of the self as something distinct from our perceptions only if there is an impression corresponding to that idea. But there could be no impression of the self considered as that to which our impressions and ideas belong, and to suppose otherwise results in “contradiction and absurdity.” Hence, there is no corresponding idea. So while Hume finds it possible to resist the conclusion that the words “necessary connection” are without any meaning, it appears that there really is no idea of the self as something perfectly simple and identical to give meaning to “self” so characterized. This enables Hume to deny that there really is any such thing as the self as represented by “some philosophers” while seeking a psychological explanation for our tendency to “run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*” (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 254; Hume’s emphasis). Note that Hume here identifies the notion of the mind or self as something distinct from its perceptions with that of a *substance*—in other words, the very view of mind he has criticized in T 1.4.5 as being unintelligible. Causal power, by contrast, may be treated as a meaningful topic for philosophical discussion.

Craig also appeals to Hume’s statement in the introduction to the *Treatise* concerning “the essence of mind being equally unknown to us with that of bodies” (T Introduction 8; SBN xvii). The reason that Craig draws attention to this passage is that it appears to illustrate the difference between an ontological claim about the mind and an epistemological one. In other words, Hume is understood to be saying here that while there *is* more to the mind than its perceptions, its “essence” (as something not available to experience) cannot be known by us. Hume’s rejection of the view of “some philosophers” regarding the existence of a self as something distinct from our perceptions (T 1.4.6.1–3; SBN 251–52) is thus taken to call into question the possibility of *knowledge* of the mind or self so understood, not the *existence* of any such mind or self (see Craig, 116). I shall say more about Hume’s references in the *Treatise* to the essences of things when I turn to Galen Strawson’s skeptical realist account of the self. For the moment, I note that Hume’s use of the word “essence” in reference to the mind is quite uncharacteristic and clearly in need of explanation. Apart from the fact that there is nowhere else in the *Treatise* where Hume writes about the unknown essence of mind, there is good

reason to think that Hume is skeptical about the philosophical notion of essence. He links the idea of essence to that of substance in the context of his claim that a philosophical term is meaningful only where the idea for which it stands can be shown to derive from an impression (T Abstract 7; SBN 648–49). Given Hume’s conclusion in the body of the *Treatise* that we have no idea of substance (T 1.4.5.6; SBN 234), we should clearly be wary of attaching interpretive weight to his own use of the term “essence.”

The most serious and thorough attempt to defend a skeptical realist account of Hume on the self is provided by Galen Strawson in his recent book *The Evident Connexion*. Before I turn to this discussion, I note that Strawson’s interpretation of Hume is anticipated in his earlier book *The Secret Connexion* (128–31). Strawson mentions there Hume’s acknowledgement that “the uniting principle among our internal perceptions is as unintelligible as that among external objects” (T 1.3.14.29; SBN 169): an apparent echo of his remark about the “essence of mind” in the introduction to the *Treatise* (*Secret Connexion*, 128). Hume is referring in this passage to the causal relations among our impressions and ideas as they figure in our causal inferences. He seems to have in mind the limitations of our experience. We can establish that there *are* certain causal relations among our perceptions, to the extent that one kind of perception is regularly followed by another, but what makes such mental regularities possible may lie beyond the scope of empirical investigation. This does not prevent Hume from indulging in speculation about such matters—perhaps most obviously where he engages in an “imaginary dissection” of the brain which would reveal the role played by traces in the relation of ideas (T 1.2.5.20; SBN 60–61). But in general Hume observes a self-imposed restraint on following philosophers like Malebranche and Descartes who engage in this kind of anatomical theorizing (T 1.1.2.1, 2.1.1.2; SBN 7–8, 275–76). There seems to be, in any case, no reason to suppose that the kind of “uniting principle” to which Hume is referring would require reference to the existence of a self beyond the succession of perceptions of which introspection makes us aware.

### Strawson and Hume’s Skepticism

Strawson’s realist interpretation of Hume depends crucially on his view of the nature of Hume’s skepticism. In *The Secret Connexion*, he stresses the non-committal character of Hume’s skepticism and argues that this should prevent Hume from making a negative ontological claim to the effect that the mind or self is nothing more than its perceptions (*Secret Connexion*, 129; for the attribution to Hume of non-committal skepticism, see 11–14, 94, 97–98, 120n4, 172, 221–22). Thus, like Craig, Strawson takes Hume to be making an *epistemological* point about the limitations on our knowledge of the mind beyond consciousness of our perceptions.

According to Strawson, provided we recognize that Hume uses “mind” to refer to the mind considered as a whole and not just to its contents, we can accept that it may have some unknown essence beyond these contents. Thus, while Hume may have asserted a bundle theory in regard to “mind” as referring to its contents, so that there is nothing more to mental contents than particular perceptions, this is not true of “mind” as a whole, which may be something with a perception-transcendent nature (*Secret Connexion*, 131).

In *The Evident Connexion*, Strawson tends to stress the “modest” or “moderate” character of Hume’s skepticism while drawing a similar conclusion about its implications for Hume’s view of the mind or self (see *The Evident Connexion*, 21, 47, 54, and 74). It would be helpful in considering the relation of Strawson’s realist interpretation of Hume to his understanding of Hume’s skepticism to reflect briefly on Hume’s references to skepticism both in the *Treatise* and in the first *Enquiry*. The phrase “non-committal” is not used by Hume himself and may in certain respects be misleading. The labels employed in one of Hume’s more extensive discussions of skepticism, in Section 12 of the first *Enquiry*, are “moderate” and “mitigated,” enabling him to contrast the skepticism he advocates with an alternative species that he describes as “excessive” and “extravagant.” Skepticism of this latter kind calls into question our ability to arrive at secure conclusions in any context (EHU 12.5, 12.17; SBN 150–51, 155–56)—for example, by querying the reliability of our faculties, including that of reason itself. The more moderate kind of skepticism is characterized by two main features. One is a rejection of the kind of dogmatism which sees things only from one point of view. This ignores the fallibility of human understanding, while in recognition of this fallibility, the “just reasoner” exhibits a degree of caution and modesty in arriving at his conclusions (EHU 12.24; SBN 161–62). The other important aspect of Hume’s mitigated skepticism consists in limiting our enquires to subjects which fall within the range of human understanding—in particular, by confining ourselves to common life and ordinary experience (EHU 12.25; SBN 162). The message appears to be, therefore, that provided we restrict our enquiries in this way and retain a certain diffidence or modesty about the conclusions at which we thereby arrive, we may reasonably commit ourselves accordingly. This message is reflected in Hume’s comment in the *Treatise* on the “Newtonian philosophy,” namely, that “[n]othing is more suitable to that philosophy, than a modest scepticism to a certain degree, and a fair confession of ignorance in subjects, that exceed all human capacity” (T 1.2.5.26 n. 12; SBN 638). Modesty as “a diffidence of our own judgement” (EPM 8.8; SBN 263)<sup>14</sup> is a virtue. In a similar vein, Hume refers to the “moderate scepticism” of “true philosophers” (T 1.4.3.10; SBN 224). Within the restrictions imposed by moderate or mitigated skepticism, however, we may find ourselves committed to certain beliefs, even if recognition of our cognitive fallibility leaves them open to revision.

How, then, does the above bear upon the ascription to Hume of a realist attitude towards both objects, or bodies, and also the self? It seems reasonable to accept that Hume would refrain from claims to *knowledge* of their existence if this would take us beyond the evidence provided by experience and the limits thereby imposed on our understanding. Strawson agrees that we should not take Hume as claiming to *know* that there is an external reality or that there is more to the mind than its perceptions or experiences (*Evident Connexion*, 47). Strawson does argue, however, that Hume firmly *believes* in the existence of an external reality as well as in the existence of a mind that is more than a series of perceptions (*Secret Connexion*, 99; *Evident Connexion*, 53–54). In each case the existence of something distinct from our experiences is something that Hume takes for granted while at the same time resisting any claim to knowledge of their existence or nature.<sup>15</sup>

The crucial question, therefore, seems to be whether or not Hume *believes* in the existence of a self distinct from its perceptions (and a similar question would arise with regard to the existence of both external objects and relations of causal necessity among those objects). As far as the case of bodies or objects is concerned, Hume views belief in their existence as the product of an operation of the imagination which is both natural and necessary to the human mind (T 1.4.7.4; SBN 266). To this extent the belief is one that is irresistible for us, whatever philosophical arguments there may be to the contrary, and hence the existence of body is something “we must take for granted in all our reasonings” (T 1.4.2.1; SBN 187).<sup>16</sup> In the language made familiar by Kemp Smith, it is a *natural* belief that human beings share with the rest of “animal creation” (EHU 12.7; SBN 151).<sup>17</sup> One of the marks of Humean natural belief according to Kemp Smith is that it is rationally unaccountable and rests exclusively on natural causes—including those involved in the association of ideas invoked to explain the beliefs with which Hume is concerned in Book 1 of the *Treatise* (Kemp Smith, 86, 454). Principles of association account for our propensity to think of the self as something simple and identical on account of the resemblance between experience of a succession of related objects and the imaginative act by which we consider an object to be uninterrupted and invariable (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–55 and T 1.4.6.16; SBN 259–60). While we may attempt to correct this mistake by reflection, we cannot for long postpone the bias of the imagination towards the confounding of identity with relation. In order to justify this “absurdity,” we imagine “something unknown and mysterious” which connects our perceptions together—in philosophical terms, a soul, or self, or substance (T 1.4.6.6; SBN 253–54).

What Hume says here obviously echoes his explanation in T 1.4.2 of belief in the existence of body as something independent and distinct from the perceptions of sense; see T 1.4.2.34 and the reference to a succession of related objects being naturally confounded with identical ones (SBN 203–204). This is not the place to pursue in any detail Hume’s position in regard to the existence of external objects

(including human bodies). However, it is worth remarking that while Hume is unable to find any argument which would prove that our sensory “perceptions must be caused by external objects, entirely different from them, though resembling them” (EHU 12.11; SBN 153), it seems that he does in general accept this account of the cause of our sensory impressions—notwithstanding his own critical discussion of the philosophical view of a “double existence” (T 1.4.2.46–48; SBN 211–13)—so long as our speculations are confined to the properties by which objects or bodies reveal themselves to us (T 1.2.5.26, including note 12; SBN 64, 638). This enables us to form a conception of external objects as being related to our perceptions by resemblance while differing numerically from them (T 1.2.6.9; SBN 68; see T 1.4.2.56, 1.4.5.19; SBN 218, 241). The case of *substance*—whether material or immaterial—is relevantly different because no such relation can obtain between perceptions and the substances in which they are said to inhere (T 1.4.5.3; SBN 232–33). And Hume conspicuously refrains from positing the existence of a self which is specifically identical to the perceptions which make up our mental lives.

The skeptical realist interpretation of Hume must presumably claim more than that he is, like the rest of us, vulnerable to the imaginative propensities which result in belief in the existence of a self to which our perceptions belong, notwithstanding the “fictions” which this is supposed to involve. There is no reason why those who interpret Hume as a bundle theorist of the self should deny that he is, as a fellow human being, susceptible to natural beliefs which may conflict with his philosophical principles. The realist claim that Hume is not, after all, a bundle theorist of the self, in spite of the many passages which suggest otherwise, concerns his position as a philosopher reflecting on personal identity and its implications for the relation between the mind and its perceptions. On the one hand, Hume’s mitigated skepticism supposedly prevents him from endorsing the bundle theory as an ontological claim about the nature of the mind or self; on the other, he accepts that, contrary to this theory, there is more to the mind or self than its perceptions while recognizing that this is not something we can be said to know. Indeed, so far as this last point is concerned, we cannot be said to have any real *evidence* for the existence of such a distinct mind or self, since this would take us beyond the scope of our changing and gappy experiences (see *Evident Connexion*, 73).

Strawson’s principal ground for ascribing to Hume the view that the mind or self is more than its perceptions appears to lie with the claim that his skepticism prevents him from endorsing the alternative bundle theory: “Hume can’t be an ontological bundle theorist because he’s a sceptic” (*Evident Connexion*, 53). But this ignores the dialectical structure of T 1.4.6. Hume is concerned there with an assumption about the self that appears to underlie the belief in personal identity—namely, that it consists in something invariable and uninterrupted. Accordingly, he begins with the claim of “some philosophers” that we are conscious

of a perfectly simple and identical self. Finding this to be contrary to experience, he concludes that “there is no such idea” of the self (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 250–51). Not only this, but Hume also raises the question of how the self that some philosophers wrongly suppose us to be conscious of is related to its perceptions. If, as Hume claims, our particular perceptions may exist separately from each other, then we have no need to posit a separate self as the “support” of the perceptions which belong to it (T 1.4.6.3; SBN 252; see also T 1.4.2.39, 1.4.5.5, T Appendix 12; SBN 207, 233, 634).

Strawson argues further that when Hume claims that experiences (or “perceptions”) may exist separately, he means only that if experiences do exist separately, then there is a separate subject for any such experience (*Evident Connexion*, 44). This interpretation of Hume finds little support in the text of the *Treatise* and, indeed, appears to be contradicted by Hume’s treatment of the imaginary case of a mind with only one perception, where he indicates that this perception is all we conceive, without “any notion of *self* or *substance*” (T Appendix 16; SBN 634). Strawson’s suggestion is also at odds with Hume’s apparent acceptance of the possibility that a perception may exist separately from a mind (T 1.4.2.40; SBN 207). When Hume states that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the collection of perceptions to which it belongs (T 1.4.2.39; SBN 207), we should note his subsequent reference to “experiments” which establish that our perceptions, in fact, have no distinct or independent existence in so far as they depend on our physiology (T 1.4.2.45; SBN 210–11). This is not to say that our perceptions, therefore, require the existence of a separate self.<sup>18</sup>

Even allowing that we may still “suppose” the existence of such a self, this supposition is deprived of any philosophical rationale.<sup>19</sup> This allows Hume to say that, leaving aside those metaphysicians (if any) who are able to perceive a simple and continued self, each of us is nothing but a “bundle or collection of different perceptions” (T 1.4.6.3–4; SBN 252–53). In other words, the bundle theory is the outcome of Hume’s rejection of a philosophical view of the self which is not only inconsistent with our experience but also unable to play its intended role. The view of the mind or self as a succession of perceptions is one to which Hume is committed by applying the “experimental philosophy” to this area of the science of man (T Introduction 7; SBN xvi–xvii); and it is a view to which, as I shall argue, he adheres throughout his philosophical writings.

An important aspect of the skeptical realist interpretation of Hume, including his account of the self, is the relation of his claim about the priority of impressions to ideas (T 1.1.1.11; SBN 6) to what he has to say about meaning. The gist of what Strawson says is that while Hume regards propositions about the ultimate nature of reality as being empirically undecidable, he does not reject them as meaningless. In fact, according to Strawson, Hume never questions the idea that something other than our experiences does, in fact, exist (*Evident Connexion*, 4). This, as Strawson

notes, might be thought to contradict Hume's apparent requirement that any significant idea must derive from experience in the form of an impression. Indeed, this is Hume's "first principle" (T 1.1.1.12; SBN 7) which allows him to say in the Abstract of the *Treatise* that "when he [the author] suspects that any philosophical term has no idea annexed to it . . . he always asks *from what impression is that intended idea derived?* And if no impression can be produced, he concludes that the term is altogether insignificant" (T Abstract 7; SBN 648–49). This strongly suggests that, for Hume, any term for which we are unable to provide a corresponding impression is thereby meaningless. According to Strawson, however, Hume does *not* claim to exhaust the content of our concepts in this way: rather, he is concerned with how far they are empirically warranted and to that extent employable in philosophy (*Evident Connexion*, 8). Strawson, therefore, disputes those interpretations of Hume that represent him as moving from an epistemological claim that our knowledge of mind is limited to the content of our experiences, to the corresponding semantic claim that these experiences are all that can be meant by the concept of mind, and finally to the ontological conclusion that there is nothing more to mind than the existence of these experiences (Strawson, *Evident Connexion*, 13).

The obvious question here is how Strawson's view of Hume's theory of ideas can be justified in the face of Hume's own appeal to the priority of impressions to ideas in elucidating the meaning of certain key philosophical ideas (for example, space and time (T 1.2.3; SBN 33–39), causation (T 1.3.2–14; SBN 73–172), the mind (T 1.4.5.3–4; SBN 232–33), and the self (T 1.4.6.2; SBN 251–52). Not only this, but there are places in which Hume appears to be quite unequivocal about the power of this principle to resolve controversies about the meaning of ideas. Apart from *Treatise* Abstract 7, where Hume ties the significance of a term to the existence of an impression corresponding to the idea involved, there is a very similar passage in the first *Enquiry* where the link between term, idea, and meaning is again made to depend on the existence of a prior impression: "When we entertain . . . any suspicion, that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it is impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion" (EHU 2.9; SBN 21–22). All this seems hard to reconcile with Craig's claim, for example, that Hume has "little real interest in the theory of impressions and ideas" (Craig, 120).

Much of the debate concerning the skeptical realist view of the relation between Hume's priority principle and his account of the meaning of the ideas with which he is concerned has to do with causal necessity and, to a lesser extent, external existence.<sup>20</sup> The comparative neglect in this context of Hume's discussion of the idea of the self seems understandable given his claim that the attempt to identify any impression corresponding to the idea of the self as something simple and identical would involve us in "contradiction and absurdity" and,

therefore, that “there is no such idea” (T 1.4.6.2). An exception to this neglect is provided by Kail’s discussion in his *Projection and Realism*. He argues here that in spite of Hume’s use of the priority principle to establish the significance of philosophical terms, he allows for the possibility of the “bare thought” of something of which we have no impression and which may not be a possible object of acquaintance (Kail, 34). But, as his own discussion indicates, this is not enough to support the skeptical realist interpretation of Hume on the self given his view of perceptions as distinct and separable existences (Kail, 129–31). Apart from Hume’s repeated statements of the “bundle” view of the self, there is also an apparent reluctance to allow for the possible existence of a simple and identical self of which experience fails to provide any corresponding impression. It is true that Hume does say that there may be “some metaphysicians” who differ from him in their view of the self (T 1.4.6.3–4), but otherwise he directly repudiates both here and elsewhere any alternative account to his own of the relation between the self and its perceptions.

Strawson does adduce further considerations for the claim that Hume accepts that there is more to the mind than its experiences or “perceptions,” contrary to the view of Hume as a “bundle theorist” for whom the mind just *is* a collection or succession of experiences. According to Strawson, we may prove this view to be mistaken in light of the fact that Hume holds both that “the essence of mind [is] equally unknown to us with that of external bodies” (T Introduction 8; SBN xvii) and also that “the perceptions of the mind are perfectly known” (T 2.2.6.2; SBN 366) (*Evident Connexion*, 17). It is, however, doubtful whether so much weight can be placed on these two quotations. Strawson returns to the former throughout his book. He finds a comparison here with Locke’s concept of real essence as something unknown to us, of which we have no real idea, but to which a word like “gold” carries a “tacit reference” (*Evident Connexion*, 15; see Locke’s *Essay* 3.10.19). It seems misguided, however, to view Hume’s references to essence in the *Treatise* as representing a *theory* corresponding to Locke’s distinction between nominal and real essence. We find that Hume’s references to the essence of such things as virtue and beauty appear to concern the necessary conditions of our experience of these moral and aesthetic properties, and there is no suggestion here that there is anything *more* to these properties than is revealed in experience (T 2.1.7.4, 2.1.8.2–3; SBN 296, 299–300).<sup>21</sup> There are similar references concerning time (T 1.2.2.4; SBN 31); power and necessity (T 1.3.14.16, 1.3.14.22, 2.3.1.10, 2.3.2.2; SBN 163, 165, 403, 409); belief (T 1.4.2.24; SBN 199); relation (T 1.4.2.34, 1.4.3.3, 1.4.6.16; SBN 204, 220, 260); causation (T 1.4.5.33; SBN 250); wit (T 2.1.7.7; SBN 297); and riches (T 2.1.10.10, 2.2.5.21; SBN 315, 365). In all these cases, Hume uses “essence” to refer to a property experienced in the form of an impression that is inseparable from the idea in question. There are also references to philosophical views about essence with which Hume is evidently in disagreement: for example, Descartes

on the essence of matter (T 1.3.14.8; SBN 159), Spinoza on substance (T 1.4.5.21, 1.4.5.23; SBN 243, 244), and the moral rationalists on virtue and vice (T 3.1.1.13, 3.1.1.15n68, 3.1.1.19 (including note 69), 3.1.1.25; SBN 460, 461, 463–64, 467–68). All this provides a clear indication that we should be wary of attaching interpretive weight to Hume’s own use of the term “essence” in the *Treatise*.

There are, it is true, several passages in which Hume refers to the unknown essence of bodies, and these might appear to echo Locke’s notion of real essence. Apart from T Introduction 8, there is also T 2.2.6.2, “the essence and composition of external bodies are so obscure” (SBN 366), and T 2.3.1.4, “we can never penetrate so far into the essence and construction of external bodies” (SBN 400). But the message in each case is much the same: namely, that natural philosophy is able to tell us about the powers and qualities of bodies only on the basis of observation and experiment. As to *why* bodies exhibit such qualities and influence each other as they do, this appears to be a matter on which experience leaves us in the dark. There is nothing here that commits Hume to anything like the scholastic notions of substance and essence which provide the background to Locke’s references to real essence.

The context of Hume’s reference to the essence of mind as something “unknown” makes it reasonably clear that his point has to do with the need to rely on our experience of the “effects” of mind in order to establish its “powers and qualities”—just as in the case of the “external bodies” with which natural philosophy is concerned. This is the reason why we should reject as “presumptuous and chimerical” any hypothesis that “pretends to discover the ultimate qualities of human nature” (T Introduction 8; SBN xvii). Hume is thus allowing that there will inevitably be aspects of the mind’s operations which may in some respects lie beyond the scope of our experience. Note, for example, his reference in T 1.1.4.6 to the association of ideas as a “kind of ATTRACTION” whose role in the mental world may be compared with that of gravity in the natural world (SBN 12–13). Hume says here that the causes of attraction are “mostly unknown, and must be resolv’d into *original* qualities of human nature, which I pretend not to explain” (T 1.1.4.6; SBN 13). This is by no means to suggest that the mind itself must be something more than its perceptions; rather, the point is that we have limited knowledge of certain aspects of the mind, not only in the case of “attraction” but also, for example, volition as a source of bodily movements (EHU 7.10–15; SBN 64–67). It is also difficult to see how much we should read into Hume’s reference to our perceptions themselves being “perfectly known.” This can scarcely apply to their relational qualities in general, yet it is the problem of saying more about the principles which underlie such qualities that Hume has in mind when he refers to the unknown essence of mind.

A particular target of Strawson’s is the “no ownership” interpretation, which ascribes to Hume the view that perceptions (or experiences) can occur in the absence

of a separate *subject* (Strawson, *Evident Connexion*, 37, 64). Given the apparent incoherence of the idea that experiences may occur independently of a subject to which they belong, Strawson draws the conclusion that whatever may be Hume's target in T 1.4.6, it cannot be the belief in subjects of experience. But is there anything here to undermine the bundle theory? Each one of our perceptions or experiences belongs to an experiencer in the form of a bundle or system of such experiences. The question is whether, as Strawson is claiming, the subject of experience must be ontologically distinct from the experiences themselves and, additionally, whether Hume himself accepts this requirement.

As further evidence against the view of Hume as an ontological bundle theorist, Strawson refers to Hume's view that ideas "remain" in the mind after the corresponding impressions cease, even if we happen not to be consciously attending to them (*Evident Connexion*, 58). How, he asks, can ideas continue to exist in the mind if all perceptions are conscious occurrences? One possible reply is that talk of ideas remaining in the mind should be understood as referring to mental dispositions, which themselves depend on the existence of corresponding *non*-dispositional properties. Hume refers to ideas which are not "in fact present to the mind, but only in power" (T 1.1.7.7; SBN 20), and his subsequent account of the part played by brain traces in the relations of ideas (T 1.2.5.20; SBN 60–61) identifies a categorical basis for this "power" of ideas to be brought to mind by custom and association, one which is consistent with both his empiricism and his rejection of the "occult qualities" associated with the doctrine of substance.

According to Strawson, Hume's discussion in the appendix of the "labyrinth" in which he finds himself as he reviews the section on personal identity reveals his recognition that the bundle theory is inconsistent with his philosophical commitments and presuppositions. Strawson reads Hume's remark in his first *Enquiry*—that "it is evident that there is a principle of connexion between the different thoughts or ideas of the mind" (EHU 3.1; SBN 23)—as confirmation of this understanding of his final position in the *Treatise* (*The Evident Connexion*, 105). In brief, the argument in support of this reading is as follows. Hume identifies in the appendix two principles which he is unable to renounce even though he is unable to render them consistent, one of them being that "*all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences*" and the other, that the mind "*never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*" (T Appendix 21; SBN 636). Hume then goes on to say that his difficulty here would be resolved if, for example, the mind *did* perceive some real connection among its perceptions. The question, then, is whether the above quotation from EHU 3.1 gives expression to this possibility in spite of the contrary principle which Hume declares himself unable to renounce. In fact, it is clear from the context of Hume's remark that his "principle of connexion" is an allusion to the association of ideas of which we are aware by reflection and not a

reference to some “real” underlying connection unavailable to experience. There is no evidence here of Hume’s renouncing the view of the relation between the mind and its ideas to which he commits himself in T 1.4.6.

Strawson notes that Hume’s problem in the appendix is often taken to concern his account of how we come to *believe* in a persisting self, an account that appeals to the principles of association. This, Strawson claims, cannot be Hume’s problem, since he pronounces himself satisfied with this account (*Evident Connexion*, 117). Strawson presumably has in mind Hume’s comment in the appendix on his summary of the argument by which he had arrived, in T 1.4.6, at his conclusion that “the thought alone finds personal identity,” namely, “The present philosophy so far has a promising aspect” (T Appendix 20; SBN 635). But everything depends on how we understand Hume’s remark at the beginning of this paragraph about his account of personal identity being “very defective” in respect of his attempt “to explain the principle of connexion, which binds [particular perceptions] together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity” (T Appendix 20; SBN 635). This appears to be an allusion to his discussion in T 1.4.6 of the relations of association—in particular, resemblance and causation—which lead us to ascribe an identity to the succession of perceptions which constitute the mind given that there is no observable real bond among them (T 1.4.6.16–19; SBN 259–61). It is, in any case, striking that, contrary to what we should expect on Strawson’s interpretation, Hume does *not* appear to retract in the appendix his account in T 1.4.6 of the mind or self as a bundle or system of perceptions. On the contrary, he repeats the claim that in reflecting on himself he perceives nothing but perceptions and concludes, “’Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self” (T Appendix 15; SBN 634). Hume goes on to suggest that the annihilation which some people believe to follow death and which destroys the self is nothing but the extinction of all our perceptions and, he adds, “These therefore must be the same with self, since the one cannot survive the other” (T Appendix 17; SBN 634–35). It is in respect of this view of the self that Hume appears to find that he is “attended with sufficient evidence” (T Appendix 20; SBN 635).<sup>22</sup>

There are several further points that might be made in favor of the view that Hume is not expressing despair in the appendix about his earlier account of the self. In the *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, for example, the human soul is described as “[a] composition of various faculties, passions, sentiments, ideas; united, indeed, into one self or person, but still distinct from each other” (4.2).<sup>23</sup> As the speaker, Demea, points out, the notion of the human soul or self as a “composition” apparently prevents us from drawing any comparison with the deity understood as a being with perfect immutability and simplicity. While this latter view comes into question in subsequent exchanges, the characterization of the mind or self as

a “composition” does not. If we are to suppose that in the appendix to the *Treatise* Hume had identified a fatal flaw in his earlier account of personal identity, it is at least surprising that he should then reintroduce something akin to the bundle conception of the mind as one of the few matters which do not become a subject of debate in the *Dialogues*. There is, in fact, a striking continuity in Hume’s references to the mind or self from Book 1 of the *Treatise* through post-*Treatise* writings such as the *Dialogues*. Thus, in T 1.4.2 we find Hume anticipating his discussion of personal identity by observing that “what we call a *mind*, is nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions, united together by certain relations, and suppos’d, tho’ falsly, to be endowed with a perfect simplicity and identity” (T 1.4.2.39; SBN 207). And in his conclusion to Book 1, Hume refers to “that succession of perceptions, which constitutes our self or person” (T 1.4.7.3; SBN 265). On the skeptical realist account we are meant to suppose that Hume explicitly withdraws this account of the mind or self in the appendix to the *Treatise*. Yet not only do we find no clear and unambiguous rejection of this account in the appendix, on the contrary, as we have seen, Hume continues there to identify the self with its particular perceptions (T Appendix 15, 17; SBN 634–35).

It is also worth pointing out that according to Hume’s advertisement to the first *Enquiry*, while he is concerned in that work to “cast . . . anew” the principles and reasonings of the *Treatise* with a view to correcting negligences of reasoning and expression contained in the latter, none of the “pieces” of which the first *Enquiry* is composed makes reference to the *Treatise* account of the self and its identity. In these circumstances, it is ironic that Strawson should elaborate on the idea that the first *Enquiry* was written to “counteract the misinterpretation of the *Treatise*” by identifying the bundle theory as one of the negligences that Hume is supposed to have in mind.<sup>24</sup>

A final point: Strawson suggests that the central problem for Hume is that on his account of the self in T 1.4.6, our perceptions *are* just bundles with no real unity (Strawson, *Evident Connexion*, 120). But Hume’s reference in T 1.4.6.19 (SBN 261) to the mind as a *system* of different perceptions (a description which is repeated in T Abstract 28; SBN 657) already indicates that the mind or self is more than just a bundle—rather, our different perceptions *influence* each other and are able to give us a concern for our past as well as our future pains and pleasures. In fact, Hume anticipates here the further aspect of personal identity to be dealt with in Book 2 of the *Treatise* (and to which he alludes at T 1.4.6.5; SBN 253). He provides there a complex account of the passions in terms of relations among our perceptions in a way which reflects the view of the mind in T 1.4.6. Since the gist of *Treatise* Book 2 is contained in the later *Dissertation on the Passions* it is difficult to accept that Hume wishes for a greater unity to the mind than this account of the relations among its perceptions would provide.

## Conclusion

In my introduction I located the skeptical realist account of the self within the wider context of the “New Hume” debate regarding the negative ontological claims Hume appears to make about both causal necessity and objects to which we attribute external existence. Whatever the merits of the skeptical realist interpretation of Hume on these latter topics, we have seen that there are particular difficulties with interpreting Hume’s account of the self in this way. While Hume’s main concern in T 1.4.6 is to account in naturalistic terms for belief in the existence of a simple and identical self, he begins with a philosophical account of the self which represents this belief as being true. In rejecting this account, Hume endorses an alternative theory of the self as a bundle (or, better, a system) of perceptions—a theory reflected in his remarks about the mind or self elsewhere in the *Treatise* as well as in later writings. Hume presents his theory as one that provides the only intelligible idea of the mind or self available to us. As such it amounts to more than a purely epistemological claim about the kind of self revealed to us in experience; for the “soul” or “substance” view is one which fails even in its purported philosophical rationale of providing an account of the relation between the mind or self and its perceptions. As for the implications of Hume’s moderate or mitigated skepticism, it is a misunderstanding to suppose that it prevents Hume from offering an ontological or metaphysical claim about the nature of the self, provided that it follows the principles of “experimental philosophy.” None of this is to deny that there is a sense in which Hume may yield to belief in the existence of a self distinct from its perceptions in that associative relations among his ideas are liable to produce the same imaginative propensities in his case as in ours. But his susceptibility to this natural belief-forming process cannot be all that the skeptical realist has in mind. The question is whether Hume is philosophically committed to the existence of a self that connects our perceptions together. Not only have we failed to find any good reason for accepting this, we have also seen that Hume can explain the causal relations among our perceptions and the dependence of perceptions on the embodied mind to which they belong without resorting to a “realist” view of this kind.

## NOTES

I would like to thank the editors of *Hume Studies* and two anonymous referees for their many helpful comments on earlier versions of this article.

1 References to the *Treatise* are to David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), hereafter cited

in the text as “T” followed by Book, part, section, and paragraph, and to *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), hereafter cited in the text as “SBN” followed by page numbers.

2 See Edward Craig, *The Mind of God and the Works of Men* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), chap. 2.5; Galen Strawson, *The Secret Connexion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), chap. 12.3; Peter Kail, *Projectionism and Realism in Hume’s Philosophy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), chap. 6.3.

3 This label is especially associated with the interpretation of Hume to be found in John Wright, *The Sceptical Realism of David Hume* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), though it is worth noting that Wright does not attempt directly to apply the skeptical realist interpretation to Hume’s account of the self. In assessing the attribution to Hume of a skeptical realist position, we need to distinguish this from the claim that, for example, Hume assumes the existence of a mind or self which is separate from its perceptions in the earlier parts of Book 1 of the *Treatise*, but then goes on in T 1.4.6 to provide an account of the self which is inconsistent with this assumption (see, for example, John Passmore, *Hume’s Intentions* (London: Duckworth 1968), 77–79). On the skeptical realist view, Hume never claims that the mind or self is nothing more than a bundle of perceptions, even in the context of T 1.4.6 (see Galen Strawson, *The Evident Connexion* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011], 34 and Craig, 111–17). Skeptical realism must also be distinguished from the view that apparent references in Hume’s writings to the existence of objective causal connections or to externally existing bodies or to a self that exists separately from its perceptions are, in each case, a matter of his speaking with the vulgar rather than thinking with the learned, to invoke the distinction made by George Berkeley (*Principles of Human Knowledge*, ed. Howard Robinson [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999], 45).

4 Entries for “self” in the *Oxford English Dictionary* indicate that the term has a philosophical use going back to the seventeenth century to signify what is intrinsic to a person or to refer to the subject of a person’s states of consciousness. Strikingly, Thomas Browne refers to “the Theatre of our selves” in his *Christian Morals* (London, 1716), part 1, sec. 24. John Locke, in his *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), describes the self as a “conscious thinking thing” and refers to consciousness as making the self (2.27.17).

5 See Nelson Pike, “Hume’s Bundle Theory of the Self: a Limited Defense,” *American Philosophical Quarterly* 4 (1967): 159–65, 161; Terence Penelhum, “Hume on Personal Identity,” *The Philosophical Review* 64 (1955): 571–89, 576; reprinted in *Hume*, ed. V. C. Chappell (London: Macmillan, 1966), 213–39, 219–20.

6 In his suppressed essay, “Of the Immortality of the Soul,” in *Essays Moral, Political, and Literary*, ed. Eugene F. Miller (Indianapolis: Liberty Fund, 1978), 590–98, Hume argues in somewhat similar fashion that the existence of the mind or soul depends on that of the body (596).

7 See Terence Penelhum, “Hume’s Theory of the Self Revisited,” in his *Themes in Hume* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 40–60, 54–56. Note, incidentally, that given this characterization of what we ordinarily believe about the self, Hume cannot be claiming that the *meaning* of ordinary statements about the mind or self may be captured in statements about bundles or collections of perceptions.

8 If this may be described as a form of reductionism, it perhaps corresponds to the way in which this notion is characterized by Derek Parfit in *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 210; see Kenneth Winkler, “‘All Is Revolution in Us’: Personal Identity in Shaftesbury and Hume,” *Hume Studies* 26 (2000): 3–40, 17.

9 This appears to be what Thomas Reid has in mind when he suggests that Hume leaves thought and ideas “without any thinking being,” in *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense*, ed. Derek Brookes (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1997), 35; see also Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, ed. Derek Brooks (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002), 473.

10 See James Giles, “The No-Self Theory,” *Philosophy East and West* 43 (1993): 175–200.

11 See Winkler, “‘All Is Revolution in Us,’” 17. As Winkler points out, we should add here the qualification that Hume is making a claim about what the mind or self is in so far as we are able to form an idea or conception of it. The alternative philosophical view he rejects is one that fails to provide us with any genuine idea of the self.

12 See Paul Russell, *The Riddle of Hume’s Treatise* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 197.

13 References to *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), hereafter cited in the text as “EHU” followed by section and paragraph, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), hereafter cited as “SBN” followed by page numbers.

14 References to *An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals* are to David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Morals*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), hereafter cited in the text as EPM followed by section and paragraph, and to Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and the Principles of Morals*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), hereafter cited as SBN followed by page numbers.

15 Note, however, that while Hume refers to body as something whose existence we have to take for granted, he makes no such suggestion about the self when considered as something distinct from our perceptions.

16 This requires some qualification. It seems evident from Hume’s own discussions of these matters that it is possible for a philosophical examination of this belief to result in at least a temporary doubt as to its truth given the “trivial qualities” of the imagination from which it arises (T 1.4.2.56; SBN 217) as well as difficulties in the view of body associated with “the modern philosophy” (T 1.4.4; cf. EHU 12.15–16; SBN 154–55). But it seems that nature or instinct will always overcome any such tendency to radical and dogmatic skepticism (T 1.4.1.12; SBN 186–87).

17 Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1949). Kemp Smith suggests that two beliefs in particular to which the term “natural” applies are that objects have a continuing, independent existence and also that in the public world so constituted they operate causally upon each other. Such beliefs are among the “facts of experience” (124).

18 The fact that Hume is prepared to grant the conceivability of separately existing perceptions counts against the claim that he also believes in a “real” self on which they would depend. See Justin Broackes, “Hume, Belief and Personal Identity” in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. Peter Millican, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 187–210, 200n22; also Kail, *Projectionism and Realism*, 130.

19 In support of his skeptical realist interpretation Strawson suggests that Hume wishes to distinguish between *supposing* and *conceiving* (e.g., *Evident Connexion*, 17–19). While not wishing to pursue the matter here, I note that this aspect of Strawson’s position is the subject of critical discussion, for example, in Kenneth Winkler, “The New Hume,” in *The New Hume Debate*, ed. Rupert Read and Kenneth Richman, (London: Routledge, 2007), 52–87, 78–80.

20 See, for example, the papers contained in *The New Hume Debate*.

21 See David Norton’s introduction to the Oxford Philosophical Texts edition of Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. D. F. Norton and M. J. Norton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 153.

22 Note that this remark follows immediately from Hume’s reference to the principle regarding the mind “*that we have no notion of it, distinct from the particular perceptions*” (T Appendix 19; SBN 635; Hume’s emphasis).

23 *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, ed. Dorothy Coleman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), cited by part and paragraph number.

24 Galen Strawson, “David Hume: Objects and Powers,” in *Reading Hume on Human Understanding*, ed. P. Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 231–57, 232, including note 5.