HUME'S APPENDIX ON PERSONAL IDENTITY

Norman Melchert

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Abstract:

The reasons why Hume expressed dissatisfaction concerning his own account of personal identity in the Treatise are unclear. Hume himself states them obscurely, and commentators have disagreed about what exactly it was that puzzled him. I offer reasons for thinking the sources of Hume's retraction have not yet been understood, and propose a reading of the text of the Appendix which explains why he was dissatisfied.

The key to the proper understanding of this text lies in two insufficiently appreciated facts: (1) that, for Hume, thoughts are perceptions too, and (2) that the unifying of perceptions can only be done by a perception of a higher level.
Hume's Appendix On Personal Identity

It is well known that in the Appendix to Book III of his Treatise, Hume expresses dissatisfaction with the account of personal identity he offered in Book I. The dissatisfaction was so acute that he simply left out any discussion of the topic in his later Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding, where it could have been expected to turn up again. Despite Hume's reputation as a philosophical stylist, the reasons why he was dissatisfied are obscurely stated, and commentators have differed widely in their reading of this Appendix. I have not found a reading which satisfies me, and here essay to improve our understanding of this puzzling passage.

1.

In that part of the Appendix dealing with personal identity, Hume begins by confessing that a strict review of his earlier opinions on that subject leaves him "in such a labyrinth that ... I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent." He then offers to "propose the arguments on both sides." Unfortunately, only the arguments on one side are at all fully set forth. And that side is the one already represented in the Treatise. He argues that we have no idea of self (or mind or thinking being -- these terms are used interchangeably), because we have no impression of it, and every idea is derived from some impression. He furthermore argues that all perceptions (a term covering both ideas and impressions) are distinct, and therefore may exist separately. In "reflection," moreover, we never perceive anything but perceptions. And the conclusion is that the mind is composed.

1 An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 1974 meeting of the Eastern Division of the American Philosophical Association. I am indebted to Stephen Nathanson and Nicholas La Para for insightful criticisms of that version.

2 All quotations from the Appendix may be found between pages 633 and 636 of the Selby-Bigge edition of the Treatise of Human Nature, as reprinted by Oxford in 1967.
of these distinct existences — of perceptions. Noting, finally, that philosophers are beginning to accept the principle that we have no idea of external substance apart from the ideas of particular qualities, Hume urges that "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."

It is of some importance to note how satisfied Hume is with the argument to this point. "So far I seem to be attended with sufficient evidence," he says immediately after this review of the Treatise argument. It is not this loosening of perceptions which now gives him pause, but the account he had given in the Treatise of what binds those distinct existences together. There is considerable scholarly uncertainty about exactly what it was that caused Hume's perplexity. And since this depends on various readings of the last two paragraphs of the section on personal identity, I shall reproduce them here, sentences numbered for easy reference.

1. So far I seem to be attended with sufficient evidence.
2. But having thus loosen'd all our particular perceptions, when I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is very defective, and that nothing but the seeming evidence of the precedent reasonings cou'd have induc'd me to receive it.
3. If perceptions are distinct existences, they form a whole only by being connected together.
4. But no connexions among distinct existences are ever discoverable by human understanding.
5. We only feel a connexion or determination of the thought, to pass from one object to another.
6. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind, the ideas of them are felt to be connected together, and naturally introduce each other.
7. However extraordinary this conclusion may seem, it need not surprise us.
8. Most philosophers seem inclin'd to think, that personal identity arises from consciousness; and consciousness is nothing but a reflected thought or perception.
9. The present philosophy, therefore, has so far a promising aspect.
10. But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness.

11. I cannot discover any theory, which gives me satisfaction on this head.

12. In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.

13. Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in the case.

14. For my part, I must plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding.

15. I pretend not, however, to pronounce it absolutely insuperable.

16. Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflexions, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions.

2.

Interpretations of this passage divide into two groups over how to understand 12. There are those who hold that the "two principles" which Hume there formulates are consistent, despite Hume's explicit words to the contrary. Among these are Norman Kemp Smith, Risieri Frondizi, and John Passmore. At first glance this seems to be correct; if all distinct perceptions are distinct existences, then of course no real connection can be perceived among them.

Still, Hume explicitly declares them inconsistent. And it is difficult to believe that so acute a philosopher as Hume could mistake corollaries of his own devising for


4 The Nature of the Self, Yale University Press, (1953), pp. 103, 104.

contradictories. At least not in a passage where he scrupu-
lously confesses earlier errors, a passage which he saw 
through the publication process into print, and which he 
ever later corrected.

The second group takes Hume at his word, but does not 
explain in what way they are inconsistent, nor why intelli-
gent commentators such as Smith can declare that "of course" 
they are consistent. Neither A. H. Basson nor D. F. Pears , 
for instance, gives a reading of 12 which makes it clear 
how the principles are inconsistent.

Actually, the disagreement over 12 has deeper roots, 
and we must pay close attention to the exact wording of the 
entire passage -- especially 10 and 13 -- if we are to do 
better. It is also important to keep in mind that the 
puzzle is not over what is wrong with Hume's account of 
personal identity -- that is not so hard to see -- but what 
Hume thought was wrong with it. What was it that led him 
to plead the privilege of a sceptic and confess the diffi-
culty too hard for him?

In this connection we must also remember that the 
Treatise view did not pretend to explain the actual identity 
of the self. According to the Treatise there is no such 
identity. What Hume had tried to do in the Treatise was to 
explain our belief that the self is one. This belief, of 
course, is a mistake, but an inevitable mistake. The out-
lines of his explanation are familiar. A succession of 
similar perceptions is confused with strict identity, 
especially if the perceptions change only a little, or very 
slowly, or if their function remains constant, or if they 
are all causally related to a common end. And numerical 
and qualitative identity are often not distinguished, so 
that we call numerically the same what is only qualitatively 
similar. We feel our thoughts led smoothly from one per-
ception to another, imagine that there is some one thing 
which accounts for the unity we feel, and construct the 
fiction of the self.

It is along such lines that Hume thought in the Treatise 
to account for the conviction -- illusory though he believed 
it to be -- of our personal identity. It is this account of 
the "principle of connexion" which "makes us attribute" to


"Hume on Personal Identity," in David Hume: A Symposium, 
perceptions a "real simplicity and identity" that he now finds "very defective." (2) We must not fall into the confusion of thinking that in the Appendix Hume is expressing doubt that his principles explain the unity of the self; he had never thought they did; they were not framed to do so; and there is no evidence that this was the source of his despair. He is perplexed because he now sees that these Treatise principles do not satisfactorily account for the belief each of us obviously has -- that he is one and the same person (or self) through all the changes he undergoes. The "principles of connexion," in short, do not do the job they were designed to do.

3.

An ideal interpretation of this text would have to contain the following:

1. An explanation of just what Hume saw to be wrong with the Treatise account.
2. An explanation of why Hume thought the principles in 12 were inconsistent.
3. An explanation of why Hume felt all exit roads to a solution were blocked.

This interpretation would have to pay close attention to the words Hume uses, and would not make use of some fact, intuition, or bit of knowledge concerning the self external to Hume's own account. Let us see if such an interpretation can be constructed.

Hume is satisfied that the mind is composed of perceptions, and that perceptions are distinct existences. They can form a whole, therefore, only by being connected together (see 3). But it is one of the cardinal principles of Hume's philosophy that human understanding or reason can never discover real connections among distinct existences (4). This is the basis of his critique of the received doctrines of causality and substance, and is repeated in 12 as one of those principles he cannot renounce. Belief in such connections is produced when we reflect on past perceptions and feel our thoughts led (by habit or custom, Hume says elsewhere) from the idea of one perception to that of another (see 5 and 6).

This is not surprising, Hume remarks, for most philosophers think that personal identity arises from reflective thought (7, 8). And so far this philosophy has a "promising aspect." (9) Note that Hume has not yet (with the exception of the allusion in 2) stated what his perplexity
is. Up to this point all seems to go swimmingly. The problem is stated in 10. But before we can analyze 10, a little spadework needs to be done.

Let us call the perceptions which we take to be of external objects first-level perceptions. And let us represent a selection of such perceptions by the letters

\[ m_1, m_2, m_3, m_4, \ldots \]

Hume's problem in the Treatise can now be put in the following way: What is it that explains the assigning of all these perceptions to one person (call him Matthew), while another selection

\[ a_1, a_2, a_3, a_4, \ldots \]

is assigned to another person or self or mind (call him Andrew), and a third

\[ s_1, s_2, s_3, s_4, \ldots \]

is assigned to Stephen? All these perceptions, it is important to note, are non-reflective perceptions. They do not have other perceptions as their objects. In no one m or a or s, nor in the whole collection of m's, a's, or s's can the idea of personal identity be found. At this level each perception simply is what it is -- of a desk, a chair, a dog (or, if you like, of a color, an odor, a sound) -- distinct and separable from any of the others.

It is reflective thought alone, remember, which finds personal identity (6). Belief in the identity of the self arises from "consciousness," and consciousness is a "reflected thought or perception" (8). Let us call these reflective thoughts second-level perceptions. (It is of the utmost importance for the proper interpretation of the Appendix to note that these "reflected thoughts" are also called "perceptions." Hume is consistent in using "perception" in this broad way throughout the treatment of personal identity, and elsewhere as well.)

Thought, reflecting on the m's, is led by the resemblances, continuities, and causal relations between them, to the idea that they form a natural whole, a self. The similarities, etc., between the m's, that is, are themselves apprehended in an experience -- a memory experience, in fact. Let us represent such a reflective memory experience by

\[ M \]
when it notes similarities, etc., between certain m's; and let us represent by A and S other experiences which note similarities, etc., between the a's and the s's.

Notice, now, what surely was evident upon reflection to Hume, that there is not one M in which the identity of Matthew is registered, but many. At different times, different second-level perceptions will occur, focusing on different selections from among the first-level perceptions. So we will have, in fact,

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\begin{align*}
M_1, M_2, M_3, M_4, \ldots \\
A_1, A_2, A_3, A_4, \ldots \\
S_1, S_2, S_3, S_4, \ldots
\end{align*}
\]

And once we have noticed this it is perfectly apparent that the same question arises again: What is it that makes the M's constitute Matthew, the A's Andrew and the S's Stephen? If we try to answer this question in Hume's way it is clear that only the apprehension of resemblances among them by a third-level perception will do the job. And now it is also clear that an infinite regress is under way. And it seems obvious that cannot be right. This, I believe, is what Hume saw.

But may this not be just speculation? Is there any textual evidence to back up this interpretation? The crucial sentence is 10, which is ambiguous and can be read in two ways. Hume here confesses his inability to explain the principles which "unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness." On one reading, the usual one to date, the perceptions spoken of are taken to be first-level perceptions, and are to be distinguished from the "thought or consciousness" in which they are united. They are the m's, the a's, and the s's, while the thoughts are the M's, the A's, and the S's. On this reading Hume is confessing that the principles he had made use of in the Treatise (resemblance, contiguity, cause and effect, plus the "easy passage" of the mind) no longer satisfy him.

If this were the case, however, we should expect Hume to retract more than just his views on personal identity. For the identity which can be ascribed to first-level perceptions is analogous to that we attribute to plants and animals. Thus we should find Hume expressing a much wider dissatisfaction with his former views than he does.

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We must look, then, to the second reading of 10. Remembering that Hume uses "perception" to cover reflective ideas and thoughts as well as impressions, we can see that the perceptions referred to here are those in our thought or consciousness. They are not the objects of thought but its elements. That is, they are reflective perceptions (perceptions of second and higher levels), the thoughts themselves. Using the terminology previously introduced, 10 may be paraphrased as follows: "But all my hopes vanish when I come to explain the principles that unite our higher-level perceptions (i.e., the elements of our thought or consciousness)."

A little reflection on the part of the reader should convince her that this is a perfectly possible reading of 10. There is also available a plausible explanation of why it has generally been read in the first way. Philosophical terminology since Kant has tended to oppose perceptions and thoughts, so that it seems very odd to speak of ideas and thoughts as perceptions. Thus it is "natural" to us to suppose the perceptions referred to in 10 must be the objects of thought. It is especially easy to do so because Hume himself seems to have been thinking of personal identity in terms of relations between first-level perceptions in the Treatise. When he saw, however, that the problem repeated itself on the level of thoughts he felt baffled. He was in the grip, I think, of a Wittgensteinian sort of puzzlement: "'But this isn't how it is!' -- we say. 'Yet this is how it has to be!'"

Sentence 10 points, then, to an infinite regress. But is the regress a vicious one? I believe it is, given the content of the belief Hume is trying to explain. Consider an M which is a perception of the requisite resemblances between a series of m's.

\[ M \rightarrow \quad m_1 \quad m_2 \quad m_3 \]

M is a reflective perception, perhaps a memory experience, which (in the Treatise view) is part of what creates Matthew's belief in his personal identity. Surely it is Matthew's belief that this memory experience is also his.

But on the Treatise view, this belief presupposes that there is a still higher-level perception in which the similarities of M and the m's are noted. The belief, that

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is, that reflective perceptions are also parts of the self they help constitute requires the existence of still higher perceptions to unite those reflective perceptions to the rest. And that is why the regress is vicious.

4.

Does this account of what Hume saw to be wrong with the Treatise view provide a basis on which the principles of 12 can be seen to be inconsistent? I believe it does. As expressed in 12, they stand as follows:

A. All our distinct perceptions are distinct existences.
B. The mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.

To understand the significance that A had for Hume we must recall the earlier argument in the Appendix. Hume believes he has "sufficient evidence" that the mind is composed of perceptions, which are therefore "the same with self." About this he seems to have no doubts. Let us call this the background assumption for the succeeding discussion.

BA. The mind is composed of perceptions.

BA and A together, of course, yield

BAA. The mind is composed of distinct existences.

And it is reasonable to suppose that Hume had this consequence in mind when he wrote A and proclaimed it inconsistent with B.

But the inconsistency does not yet appear. Let us look for a moment at 13. Here, immediately following his statement of A and B, Hume sets forth what seem to him to be two possible alternatives to the Treatise view. This passage surely indicates that when Hume wrote the Appendix he saw just three possible explanations for our belief in personal identity through time.

1. There is "something simple and individual" in which our perceptions inhere (the mind, soul, or self).
2. There is a real connection between perceptions which can be perceived (in which case the connected elements altogether constitute the mind).
3. There is just a fiction, imaginatively constructed on the basis of similarities between completely distinct perceptions.
Hume had tried 3 in the Treatise, and he now sees that it doesn't work. And the reason it doesn't work is that it leads to the regress. (That is the burden of 10). That leaves 1 and 2 as the only possibilities.

Now Hume's philosophical principles commit him not only to A, but also to B. He wants to say B. In fact, he needs to say B, for it is on B that his analyses of causality and external substance hang. B, however, contains the phrase "the mind." And Hume must face the question: what meaning does that phrase have in B?

If a reading of B along the lines of the third possibility is ruled out, there are just two other alternatives.

B1. The mind is something simple and individual in which perceptions inhere, and none of these perceptions is of a real connection among distinct existences.

According to B1, the mind is not "composed" at all, and so it is inconsistent with A (understood in the light of the background assumption, and so with BAA directly).

Suppose we try the second alternative. In this case B comes to

B2. The mind is a collection of really connected perceptions, and contains no perception which is of a real connection among distinct existences.

But B2 is also directly inconsistent with BAA, and so inconsistent with A-in-the-context-of-the-background-assumption.

We can now see, I think, why A and B are principles Hume can neither renounce nor reconcile. Given the inadequacy of the Treatise view, and the fact that Hume can imagine only two alternatives, it follows that B must be construed along one of the latter lines. But each of them turns B into something inconsistent with other strongly held convictions of his (BA and A). For precisely this reason he cannot

10 It is worth noting that such a reading is possible. B would then state: "The mind is just a collection of distinct perceptions, none of which is perception of real connections among distinct existences." This is the Treatise view and, of course, makes B consistent with A. But of course this reading doesn't escape the regress.
accept these alternatives. And there seems no way out at all. It's no wonder Hume is puzzled and "pleads the privilege of a sceptic."

5.

The interpretation I have offered explains what Hume saw to be wrong with his earlier views, shows how he must have understood his principles to have pronounced them inconsistent, and makes clear why he felt all exit roads to a solution were blocked. It does this by paying close attention to the text and without bringing in principles Hume could not himself have avowed.

We may wish to say that Hume was inappropriately searching for criteria of identity where none are to be found. Or that questions of personal identity must include reference to a body, empirically identified. But Hume did not see either of these possibilities. In the grip of a sensationalist epistemology and theory of meaning, Hume pursued his researches into the realm of the self. It was a great critical accomplishment to see that such a project must come to grief. Though we might wish that he had expressed his perplexity as clearly as I believe he saw it.

Norman Melchert
Philosophy Department
Lehigh University
Bethlehem, Pa. 18015