

Hume on Personal Identity

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The question I attempt to answer in this essay is twofold. The first part of the question asks whether we can find an unchanging core to a person and the second part of the question asks whether this, if there is such a core or not, has any relevance to the way we think of the identity of that mind or that person. I follow Hume in my answer of the first question, stating that we cannot ever perceive of such an unchanging core in a person that could be seen as the 'real person'. In answering the second question I take another line than Hume, arguing that Hume's conception of identity rests on some confusions about what we mean when we speak of identity and sameness, and that the identity of mind. The identity of a person is not so much bound up with a notion of an unchanging core as it is with the things surrounding the fact that we are bodily beings.

Hume begins his discussion on personal identity with a philosophical idea that he sees as clearly false. This is the idea that "we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self ... and are certain ... of its perfect identity and simplicity" in the way that we cannot doubt its existence without doubting everything else. This assumption does not seem as clear to Hume as it has to some other philosophers. To have an idea of a self there needs to be an impression that corresponds to that idea and Hume asks in what way can we assert this identity since there is not any impression that is constant and invariable enough to give rise to such an idea of a self (A Treatise on Human Nature, p. 251). Instead all of our impressions, pain, pleasure, grief, joy and so on, are momentary and succeed each other rather than exist at the same time. Therefore, they cannot constitute the ground for a self. Our perceptions are also "different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately consider'd, and may exist separately, and have no need of anything to support their existence". They do not need to be connected to a self to exist and since we cannot observe such a self but only these perceptions, and cannot think of ourselves as existing without these perceptions, Hume concludes that we are "nothing but a bundle of or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement" (Treatise, p. 252). From this Hume takes it to follow that "[t]he identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man is only a fictitious one" (Treatise, p. 259).

That we still go on and ascribe identity to persons, even if there is not any unchanging self that would justify this description is, according to Hume, to be explained as a trick of the mind. We perceive of something as a continuous object even if it is in fact a succession of related objects, so that, when the change in an object, for example, is gradual or inconsiderable, we do not notice that we are concerned with a diversity of objects but regard it as the same object. In persons this relation between the objects can be seen in the resemblance and causation between our different perceptions. These relations do not however, Hume goes on to say, exist in themselves but are in turn also imposed on the objects by our imagination. We have an idea of the impressions as related to each other, but

the impressions in themselves exist separately and distinctly from each other and are not dependent on each other. In that sense we cannot even say that there are bundles of perceptions, the only thing we can say that there is, is perceptions. There are several problems connected with this idea that perceptions are all there is. We might for example ask in what way we can distinguish between our own and others' perceptions, if we for example could be able to mistake somebody else's perceptions with our own. We might also ask how we are to account for the different ways we relate to these perceptions; that I have a pain will matter to me in another way than that there are pains in this room or that someone else is in pain. I will not pursue these questions in this essay. For now it is enough to remark that they are there.

Hume's account of personal identity is probably one of the most criticised ideas in philosophy, often stated as a good example of how wrong a philosophical discussion can go. Despite the confusions we can find in Hume, there is however a sense in which he seems to be right. This is in the rejection of the idea that there is some inner unchanging core to ourselves and the people surrounding us. Hume is denying the idea that the identity of a person is connected with the recognition of a self, a soul or a substance that our identity consists in, and that makes it possible for us to talk about people as being the same persons even though they go through significant physical and psychological changes throughout their lives. This idea is for example very clear in Descartes' thinking, where the thinking and existing I is conceived of as a substance that we are intimately conscious and constantly aware of in ourselves. Hume however remarks that when he looks inward he cannot observe any unifying thing within himself. "For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat and cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception." Hume also holds that this is true for everyone else, except for some metaphysician that might concede that he can "perceive something simple and continu'd, which he calls *himself*" (p. 252).

I think we can agree with Hume that the self is not something that we can observe by looking inwards. It does not seem right to say that when we speak of 'I' we are pointing to some inner substance either. 'I', in that sense, does not refer to something particular within us, it is not something we can perceive or be conscious of. It then looks as if Hume is right in rejecting this picture of the identity of a person as being grounded in a self, a soul or a substance. However, and unfortunately, he does not succeed in giving us a better explanation of what it is we think of as personal identity, when he describes it as mere "bundles of perceptions".

One of the problems with Hume's discussion, that Terence Penelhum also raises in 'Hume on Personal Identity', is that he does not seem to have a clear conception of the notion of identity. Hume regards identity as "a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time". This is seen in relation to the notion of diversity that is described as "a distinct idea of several different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation" (Treatise, p. 253). It is in this distinction that Hume sees the confusion that underlies our talk about personal identity. Our image of a succession of related objects resembles that of an unchanging object and in that we mistake a case of diversity for identity. Hume's account of identity and diversity may however be questioned. First, as Penelhum points out, it is not a contradiction to say that a succession of different objects also is one object, (one of the problems here lies in the loose meaning of the word object). A sentence or a musical theme, for example, consists of a

succession of words or notes that are each separate and distinct but still make up a whole, one sentence or one theme ('Hume on Personal Identity', p. 580).

Second, there seems to be a problem in Hume's basic claim that identity or sameness is seen in a thing not changing over a period of time. This idea does not reflect on how we usually think of something as the same thing, which is also apparent in Hume's discussion where he gives examples of practices that he thinks show the ways we are mistaken when we say that something is the same thing. For example, we think of a ship as the same ship even if parts of it are changed, because all parts conspire to a common end (Treatise, p. 257). One of the problems with this discussion, that Penelhum also remarks upon ('Hume on Personal Identity', pp. 580-581), is that Hume is confusing two different ideas of identity, numerical and specific identity, even if he himself at one point makes a distinction between them. He fails to see that we are not always talking about one thing when we are talking about identity and that there are different ways of talking about things as being the same. Two new cars can for example be identical in the specific sense. They are two objects but have the same qualities, and can in that sense be said to be the same car. It does not for instance matter if I buy the one car instead of the other. Possessing the same qualities, as Hume seems to understand identity, is not however the only way of understanding something as the same. The car that somebody has now, for example, is still the same car that they bought ten years ago even if its qualities have altered over this period of time, it now has rust on it, some parts may have been changed in it and so on. To point at these differences and say that they are proof that it is not the same car that they bought would in most circumstances be absurd. We would not for example say that it is not their car since it is not the same as the car they bought ten years ago. If we look to the qualities, in the specific sense, it is not the same car, but in the numerical sense it is.

What Hume misses in our talk about personal identity and people being the same over a period of time and changes, is that we in these cases are talking about identity in the numerical sense rather than in the specific sense. Throughout their lives people go through smaller and bigger changes, which involves their physical appearance as well as their characteristics, and to maintain that the qualities of the child and the full grown man are identical would be ridiculous. However, it is not ridiculous to say that it is the same person, in the same way as the tree we have in our garden is the same tree as the sapling that we planted there a number of years ago. There are of course situations where we say that people are not the same persons as they were before. Someone might, for example, undergo drastic changes in their personality as a result of an illness, drug abuse and so on, and change so much that their close ones do not recognise the person they know, or once knew, in them. That a person's characteristics can change so much that we do not think of the person as the same as he was before seems to support Hume's claim that the identity that we ascribe to persons is fictitious. This idea however, does not account for the importance we attach to a person being the same. If we could just shrug and say, 'Well, no person is ever the same', Hume's claim might be in place, but this does not capture the tragedy we can experience in realising that somebody is not the same person any more. The tragedy that we may experience in the above mentioned examples is rather bound up with the fact that it really *is* the same person. It is not just any person, or another person, so that we even could be happy to get to know this new person, but a person we knew, a person we had a certain relationship with, shared a certain past with and so on. All this is now lost, and the painful part is that the person in a way still is here to remind us of this loss.

A problem for Hume is that he, when tries to give an account of personal identity, focuses on the identity of the mind. If the identity of mind is what he is most concerned with, this might be a reason not to be too hard on his account of personal identity, but since he does seem to want to say something about the identity of persons, this objection might also

be overlooked. What this focus on the identity of the mind misses out on is the fact that we are bodily beings and that a large part of our understanding of the identity of persons consists in this. A person is not only a mind, but also someone with a body, a history, a name, a family and so on. It might sound as a trivial remark but in a way we might say that our identity partly consists in the information we have on our identity cards. In stressing the fact that persons are bodily beings it is also important to see that a person is someone who leads a life, and that the continuity of this life, growing up and getting older, is part of our conception of personal identity. This goes to show that the way we go about ascribing identity to persons is not only something to do with recognising unchangeable qualities in them, but is part of a life where we live as persons among other persons.

Hume characterises identity as remaining unchanged over a period of time and since he cannot observe anything constant and unchanging in a person, but only a diversity of perceptions, he concludes that “the identity we ascribe to the mind of man is fictitious”. This does not however follow from there being no unchanging core, a self, substance or soul, to a person, and Hume’s conception of identity seems to be seriously muddled. He recognises that the ways we use to talk about identity and sameness differ, but takes this to mean that we sometimes are mistaken in talking about something as the same thing instead of seeing that we are talking about it in different ways. Sameness does not only consist in having identical or persisting qualities over a period of time, what we come to see as the same depends on the circumstances and the factors we chose to see as relevant in the certain situation. In emphasising the identity of mind, Hume also misses the importance the fact that we are bodily beings with a history and a continuous life has when we ascribe identity to a person. We do not come to know minds in our life, we come to know human beings and persons that we can relate to and that can matter to us in certain ways.

Bibliography

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Terence Penelhum “Hume on Personal Identity”, *Philosophical Review* 1955