

Cognitive Critique



HUME'S SELF

DOUGLAS LEWIS

*Department of Philosophy, University of Minnesota
Minneapolis, Minnesota*

EMAIL: lewis002@umn.edu

Accepted February 10, 2011

KEYWORDS

Hume, personal identity, self

ABSTRACT

What Hume has to say about personal identity in the section of the *Treatise* titled *Of personal identity* is the subject of this paper. Here I present my interpretation of his position and argue for the coherence and intelligibility of it. Further, I suggest that the view displays insight about human personal identity.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper I present an interpretation of Hume's account of personal identity and argue for the coherence and intelligibility of the account.¹ Further, I suggest that the view displays insight about human personal identity.

Although it might seem that I am flying in the face of Hume's assessment by taking this position, I don't think that it is the case that I am. In the appendix to the second volume of the *Treatise* (containing Book III), published in 1740, Hume finds fault with his discussion of personal identity in the first volume (containing Books I and II), published the year before. He says that, upon review,

“I find myself involv'd in such a labyrinth, that I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent” (p. 633).

But he does not know how to correct his former opinions – the account of personal identity, the principles informing it – because he can find nothing wrong with them. Of one principle he says, for example, referring to a consequence,

“[h]owever extraordinary this conclusion may seem, it need not surprize us” (p. 635); he says of other principles, “nor is it in my power to renounce...them (p. 636).

The defect of his discussion lies, rather, in its failure to pull together the intricate and tangled arrangement of its multiple strains into a suitable whole that gives full satisfaction, and he does not know at this moment how to remove this differently.²

As we, and Hume, use the expression *personal identity*, to say that I, for example, have personal identity is to say that an individual of the past who did observe, think, or remember things and I who am now observing, thinking, and remembering things are one and the same person. For example, I remember being frightened by a Halloween parade to which my father took me when I was about three and a half years old. It was evening; we stood along the side of the street; paraders in witch and skeleton costumes danced back and forth diagonally across Main Street and swooped towards us as we looked on. I asked my father to take me home; I made sure I didn't step on any cracks in the flagstoned pavement as we walked. Once we reached the first cross street, I was safe: the street was a river, and witches and goblins don't swim. I can date this memory because our eastern New Jersey town banned Halloween parades when the United States entered the war against Japan and Germany in December of 1941, and it didn't revive the practice of the parades when the war ended.

That boy who lived long ago, and no longer exists, and I who live now, and do very much exist, are the same person. I am the man whom the boy became, and he is the child who I once was. What is the sameness that I possess that makes me and such an individual of the past the same person? Every individual who has personal identity can ask this question of self, and Hume supplies us with the answer that he gives to it.

HUME'S ACCOUNT

Hume's account of personal identity, or self, extends to human personal identity only; if other creatures, such as angels, for example, or perhaps dolphins, have personal identity, they will have to work out an account of their identity for themselves. I have tried to bring together the several aspects of his explication into a single formula; on my characterization, there are two distinct clauses, each of which is necessary and both of which taken together are sufficient. In addition, Hume puts considerable emphasis on a point about fictions. I will use this scheme to organize my presentation, explaining the particular contribution of each element separately. Furthermore, my characterization centers on the notion of imperfect identity, and imperfect identity is in turn defined in terms of the notions of diversity and perfect identity, so these three concepts need elucidation. Moreover, I will try to clarify the sorts of circumstances that, according to Hume, give rise to our ideas of diversity and perfect identity, for reflection on these circumstances, along with other aspects of our experience, explains our idea of personal identity as Hume's account portrays it.

To begin, then, with personal identity. On Hume's account

- (I) to have personal identity, or be a self, for a human being consists in the following two elements: (1) having an imperfect identity; and (2) ascribing an imperfect identity to oneself.

In presenting his account, Hume puts considerable weight on what he views as the human propensity to accompany our ascription of imperfect identity with the fiction of a perfect personal identity throughout the span of our life. He emphasizes with this feature the inclination to which we are vulnerable to ignore, or refuse to accept, our criteria for identity. A fiction is, as he uses the term, an invented idea or imaginary thing; in the context of reflection on personal identity, we have an inclination to indulge the pretense of reality of a fiction. I will say a few more things about Hume's fictions below.

Imperfect identity serves as the central concept of this view of personal identity, so we need its definition in order to discern what personal identity is. Accordingly,

- (II) something is imperfectly identical (or has imperfect identity) just in case it is, to close thought, diverse and the manner of its diversity prompts attribution of perfect identity to it.³

By the phrase *to close thought*, I intend to mark in the definition the relation of the definition to experience: from the perspective of the experience of ourself when we attend carefully, we are diverse, whatever may or may not be the case from a metaphysical perspective, a consideration lying beyond the scope of Hume's interest.⁴ I will explain what is meant by the notion of the manner of the diversity of an imperfectly identical thing below. Well, this elucidation alone is of little help – the problem of understanding now transfers to the notions of diversity and perfect identity. So, I can say on behalf of Hume that

- (III) something is diverse (or has diversity) just in case it has neither continuous, i.e. uninterrupted, nor invariable existence.

Contrastingly,

- (IV) something is perfectly identical (or has perfect identity) just in case it has continuous, i.e. uninterrupted, and invariable existence.

The term *invariable* in this usage means *remains the same thing*.

When one attends to these four concepts – perfect identity, diversity, imperfect identity, and personal identity – in relation to each other, one sees that Hume's account of personal identity assigns a tension to the thinking of the personally identical individual or self about self. For according to the account (even setting aside the issue of fictions), a human individual's personal identity consists in the individual's being imperfectly identical and also ascribing imperfect identity to itself. The ascription is correct in that a human self does in fact, on the account, have imperfect identity. However, imperfect identity involves, on the one hand, being incited to attribute perfect identity to the imperfectly identical thing, where perfect identity is equivalent to having continuous and invariable existence, and, on the other, being, to close thought, diverse, where diversity is equivalent to having neither continuous nor invariable existence. So the perceptive, imperfectly identical individual has the recognition that, so far as its experience extends, it lacks continuous and invariable existence and yet finds itself prompted to attribute these very features to itself by the manner in which it lacks them.

One may get the impression of an incoherency in Hume's view of personal identity from the points above. And even if perhaps the view itself dodges the fault of incoherence, it seems to affix it as essential to the thinking of the personally identical individual or self. But no matter to what one might assign it, I believe that the impres-

sion of incoherence, or unintelligibility, is entirely illusory, as I will now try to show.

HAVING AN IMPERFECT IDENTITY: SOME PRELIMINARIES

As they are defined, diversity and perfect identity are contraries: nothing can be both diverse and perfectly identical at the same time. Notwithstanding, we do frequently attribute perfect identity to things that are, to close thought, diverse. Indeed, we make such an attribution because the manner of diversity of different diverse things varies markedly from case to case, so that while some diverse things are not easily confused with perfectly identical things, others are easily confused with them. Hume brings out this point about diversity and its consequence by means of examples, illustrating, for example, (a) the source in experience of our idea of perfect identity, (b) the source in experience of our idea of diversity, and (c) cases of the ease of transition of thought from the idea of diversity to that of perfect identity. My illustrations below are adaptations of Hume's examples; the third exhibits an instance of the sort of manner of diversity that enters into the definition of imperfect identity.

Regarding perfect identity, consider (a) a mass of matter that is present to an uninterrupted consciousness and that, while perhaps changing in place or moving in its parts, preserves its shape and size over a period of time. Such a perception, as Hume would call it, gives us the idea of perfect identity: the mass at the end of the period and the mass at the beginning are as displayed one continuous and invariable mass of matter. Now consider by way of contrast (b) a mass of matter present to an uninterrupted consciousness that abruptly and markedly changes its size. The object present to consciousness in this case gives us the idea of diversity: neither the mass we contemplated before the disruption nor the mass we contemplate after it has as displayed continuous or invariable existence.

In the instance of diversity above, the identical and the diverse are not easily confused with each other. Consider for comparison, however, (c) a case of a consciousness of a mass of matter that is interrupted, let us say, by a diversion of attention and that is followed by a fresh consciousness accompanied by a memory of the original consciousness. Suppose that the mass of matter that is present to the present consciousness has the appearance, in light of the memory, of being the same as the mass present to the original. Despite appearances, though, nothing in this instance has as displayed continuous and invariable existence. The mass of matter as it was present

to consciousness a moment ago is not present to consciousness now, only the memory of it, which is an idea, is. Nor is the original consciousness, being past, retrievable. We cannot, for example, check our memory with reference to that of which we have remembrance to confirm the memory's faithfulness: it is observations made by others, knowledge of causation, written records of past events, and the like, that supply us with this assurance. We do not, though, commonly engage in such keen reflectiveness, but simply cast the present mass of matter in the mold of perfect identity, supposing it to be a continued and invariable existence from the past.⁵

ASCRIBING AN IMPERFECT IDENTITY TO ONESELF

Hume maintains, as I noted at the outset, that human personal identity involves having an imperfect identity. However, although imperfect identity is necessary for personal identity in his view, having an imperfect identity is not sufficient for personal identity because many things of a great variety of sorts have imperfect identity and yet few things have personal identity. Indeed, only human beings have the reflectiveness of personal identity, at least so far as we know: where other imperfectly identical things don't ascribe identity to themselves, we do ascribe identity to ourself. In the circumstance in which imperfect identity is also personal identity, the individual who ascribes the identity and the individual to whom the identity is being ascribed are the same.

That the feature of self-ascription is a criterion for Hume's account of personal identity becomes clear from the range of examples of imperfectly identical things that he entertains in his discussion. In the case of each example, it is we who attribute continuous and invariable existence to the item in light of the manner in which the item's diversity affects our thinking. In none (except our own case) does the thing itself attribute this identity – or indeed any identity – to itself, for (except for us) none of the things has the reflectiveness of personal identity, or of being a self. Hume mentions masses of matter whose changes are gradual and proportional to the whole, a ship whose many repairs have left it with few of the original materials, although it is still the same ship, interrupted sounds, swollen rivers, and especially plants and animals. He likens human personal identity to the identity of plants and animal bodies: the mutual relations of cause and effect of the parts, and common end of the whole, of a plant or animal are similar to ours. Of plants he says, for example,

“An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak; tho’ there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same” (para. 12).

In all these instances, we attribute continuous and invariable existence to the thing because the thing’s changes conform with, and do not disrupt, our thinking of it in this way. Similarly, we attribute continuous and invariable existence to ourself because our changes are of a like kind.

I will introduce a summary and review in four points at this juncture. Human individuals, at least (most) adult human individuals, are selves and have personal identity. To our experience of self, a self consists, first of all, of a motley of diverse thoughts, observations, memories, feelings, inclinations, moods, and so on that, as Hume remarks in his analogy of the theater,

“pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations” (para 4).

Yet secondly, we affirm of self, in becoming a self, a continuous and invariable existence – a history extending as far as our memory extends, and beyond it, and also, we hope, into the future. That we affirm such an existence is not simply a caprice; indeed, doing so constitutes, in part, what it is to have personal identity. Correspondingly, the institutions and social arrangements (e.g. birth certificates, court records, literature, etc.) that enforce and constrain our histories are not simply arbitrary, although they are highly conventional. Still thirdly, the source of this self-ascription lies only in the particular ways in which the distinct and diverse elements that compose a self are related to each other and confusedly influence our thinking: we have no acquaintance with any feature of self that marks the self’s continuousness and invariability. There being no such feature entering into the composition of self, we have accordingly, in the fourth place, the liberty to construct, within the constraints of the natural order and social forms, our histories ourself. These statements express what I understand to be central points of Hume’s thinking about human personal identity.

I want to call attention to an important point concerning Hume’s language before concluding this section. In his review of the examples of things other than ourself to which we ascribe imperfect identity, where he has made the point of likening human identity to the identity of plants and animals, Hume employs the word *fictitious*, saying,

“[t]he identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one...” (para 15).

Human personal identity is, though, on his positive account, as I have argued above, not fictitious – the term *fictitious* has no application here. Issues about personal identity arise for persons, and that we are persons is as real as reality gets. He has adopted the language of his detractors, and is not speaking in his own voice, in using this term. According to them, having personal identity, or being a self, consists simply in having perfect identity, that is, continuous, i.e. uninterrupted, and invariable existence. From the perspective of that view, the identity that Hume ascribes to *the mind of man* is indeed a fictitious, unreal, or counterfeit one. But the fiction lies with the detractors. By the rhetorical stratagem of using their language to characterize his view Hume confronts his opponents with a consequence of their view: in light of the fact that we don't have perfect identity, to insist on perfect identity as the only acceptable account of personal identity renders us without identity altogether.

BEING SUBJECT TO THE PROPENSITY TO ACCOMPANY THE ASCRPTION OF IMPERFECT IDENTITY WITH A FICTION

I will conclude my exposition with a few comments on Hume's fictions. Hume holds that, as individuals who have personal identity, or are selves, we are subject to the propensity to accompany the ascription of identity to ourself and others, and other things, with the pretense of a fiction. The term *fiction* in his usage designates invented ideas and imaginary things. He notes several examples of fictions that bear on the issue of identity:

“the continu'd existence of the perceptions of [that is, the objects present to] our senses”; “the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and *substance*”; “something unknown and mysterious” (Hume, 1978, para 6). He says that he is inclined to think that the third instance informs “the identity we ascribe to plants and vegetables” (para 6).

Now, the source of our propensity to indulge these fictions lies in the language of identity:⁶ our concept of identity includes the notion of the continuous, i.e. uninterrupted, and invariable existence of the thing to which we assign identity. Yet we recognize by reflection, as he has argued, that our attribution of continuous and invariable existence to the things to which we attribute it stems from the effect upon our thinking of the way in which the diverse parts of a

diverse things relate to each other and not from acquaintance with any supposed continuous and invariable existence. This recognition affronts our concept of identity; in consequence, the recognition inclines us to indulge the pretense of a fiction.

Are we, though, necessitated to concede to this propensity concerning fictions? Hume's answer is *no*. He distinguishes two propensities from each other in his discussion: (1) the propensity to *substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects* (para 6); and (2) the propensity to *attend* our ascription of identity *with a fiction* (para 7). We are necessitated to yield to the first propensity; indeed, one's having personal identity, or being a self, depends on it. We are not, however, forced to yield to the second. For him each of us can grasp with the aid of empiricist philosophy the true nature – namely, self-ascribed imperfect identity – of personal identity, affirm oneself as a self with this understanding, and resist the nagging inclination to indulge the pretense of reality of purely imaginary things about self.

CONCLUSION

I have presented an interpretation of Hume's account of personal identity and argued for the coherence and intelligibility of the account in this paper. I have tried to show that, despite the ease with which one can get the impression of incoherency, the impression of the incoherency of the view is illusory. Further, I have suggested that the view displays insight about human personal identity. Hume has accommodated some actually jarring, and seemingly inconsistent, aspects of our experience of self by relating strains of our identity in the way that he has.

For example, we possess a past without which we wouldn't be the persons that we are in the very fact of having personal identity. I am the man whom that child of three and a half whose fright I experienced became; it isn't up to me not to be him; not being him isn't a freedom that I possess. Still, we have the freedom, even within the restraints of truth, and integrity, to tell the story of self – not only to others, but also to self – largely as we see fit. My history doesn't fix the affective and cognitive relations that I have to it – I am free to choose my attitudes towards myself as I will, within the limits of who I am (and the environment in which I am). Human personal identity being defined in terms of imperfect identity, Hume's view

of personal identity captures these aspects of our experience and, in this way, displays insight about human personal identity.

ENDNOTES

1. See the Appendix for an outline of my interpretation.
2. The source of difficulty is the requirement to explain how the ideas of the diverse objects that present themselves to consciousness and compose a mind are felt to be connected together, so that, as a result of being felt this way, they introduce the idea of identity. Hume says of the explanation that he had given in terms of memory,

“I am sensible, that my account is very defective”
(Hume, 1978, p. 635); and yet now he “cannot discover
any theory, which gives me satisfaction on this head”
(p. 636).

See Don Garrett (1981), *Hume's Self-Doubts about Personal Identity*, for a different standpoint on the labyrinth in which Hume found himself; see also Daniel Flage (1987), *The Minds of David Hume*; these authors interpret Hume as more despairing than I do about his account of personal identity. In contrast, Corliss Swain (2006) argues in *Personal Identity and the Skeptical System of Philosophy* for the intriguing point that Hume registers no fault at all about his account in the appendix. Swain also references many other commentators on Hume on personal identity in her article. My interpretation aims to bring out the significance for self-understanding of the issues addressed by the view. See Sarah A. Bishop Merrill (1994), *A Feminist Use for Hume's Moral Ontology*, for an analysis of Hume's perspective on personal identity with which I am in sympathy.

3. Hume uses the phrase *imperfect identity* in paragraph 9 of his chapter. Earlier, he had called this identity *identity, in an improper sense* (para 7).
4. Hume does not assert categorically that human individuals are diverse (see definition of *diverse* below). However, he does assert categorically – that is to say, as fully warranted by experience – that human individuals are, to close thought, diverse.

5. Hume appeals to the following principle to explain the substitution of identity for related objects: the act of mind by which we contemplate an uninterrupted and invariable object and the act of mind by which we contemplate a succession of closely related objects are to feeling *almost the same* (para 6). The similarity of feeling causes the acts to appear to resemble each other; the appearance of resemblance causes us to mistake the objects for each other.

6. I draw this interpretation from, for example, Hume's statement, "[t]hus the controversy concerning identity is not merely a dispute of words" (para 7). Here he is saying that the parties to the controversy concerning identity share an agreement on, and have no misunderstanding of, what the word *identity* means.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bishop Merrill SA (1994) A feminist use for Hume's moral ontology. In: Bat-Ami Bar On (ed) *Modern engendering: critical feminist readings in modern western philosophy*. State University of New York Press, Albany, NY, pp 69-91
- Flage DE (1987) The minds of David Hume. *Hume Studies* 13: 245-274
- Garrett D (1981) Hume's self-doubts about personal identity. *The Philos Rev* 90: 337-358
- Hume D (1978) Of personal identity, *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, Part IV, Section VI. 2nd edn., University Press, Oxford
- Swain CG (2006) Personal identity and the skeptical system of philosophy. In: Saul Traiger (ed) *The Blackwell guide to Hume's treatise*. Blackwell, Oxford, pp 133-150

APPENDIX

HUME'S ACCOUNT IN SUMMARY

- I. A *self* is something that has personal identity, and whatever has *personal identity* is a self. To have personal identity, or be a self, for a human being consists in (1) having an imperfect identity and (2) ascribing an imperfect identity to oneself. Additionally, we are subject to the propensity to accompany

the ascription of imperfect identity with the fiction of a perfect personal identity. This feature notes a susceptibility to the risk of ignoring the criteria for identity as a person on our part.

- II. Something is *imperfectly identical* (or has *imperfect identity*) just in case it is, to close thought, diverse and also the manner of the diversity prompts attribution of perfect identity to it. By the phrase *to close thought*, I intend to mark in the definition the relation of the definition to experience.
- III. Something is *diverse* (or has *diversity*) just in case it has neither continuous, i.e., uninterrupted, nor invariable existence. The manner of diversity of different diverse things varies markedly from case to case, so that while some diverse things are not easily confused with perfectly identical things, other diverse things are easily confused with them.
- IV. Something is *perfectly identical* (or has *perfect identity*) just in case it has continuous, i.e., uninterrupted, and invariable existence. The term *invariable* in this occurrence means *remains the same thing*.
- V. A *fiction* in Hume's usage is an invented idea or imaginary thing; we have an inclination to indulge the pretense of reality of a fiction, in reflecting on personal identity.