

Intercollegiate Lectures 2001 **Hume** Lecture 7 - A Bundle of Perceptions:

J.L.Thomas The Fiction of Personal Identity

Texts:

Treatise SB pp.199-208; NN I.iv.ii paras 22-44.

and all of **I.iv.vi 'Of Personal Identity'**

Appendix SB pp.633-636; NN paras 10-21.

Secondary:

Penelhum, 'Hume on Personal Identity' in Chappell, pp. 213-239.

Pears, 'Hume on Personal Identity'

in Pears (ed.) *Hume A Symposium*

Stroud, Ch. vi.

Dicker, Ch. I sec. iv.

Noonan, Ch. 5

Hume's scepticism about personal identity would seem to be shown by his repeated use of the words "fiction", "mistake" and "error". *Is Hume a sceptic about personal identity?*

What does "identity" mean for Hume?

cfr. SB 200-201; NN I.iv.ii paras 26 ff.

Hume is inclined to think the notion of identity a bit of a nonsense; not a real relation.

If we say

'a is a' or 'A thing is identical with itself' ...

and we are just talking about '...at the present instant' our statement is really just a statement of unity and a denial of diversity (number). Identity (if there were such a thing) would belong in between unity and

diversity. However,

"Betwixt unity and number there can be no medium;

no more than betwixt existence and non-existence".

But *add the passage of time* - if you have an invariable and uninterrupted impression, it will have multiple (earlier and later) parts but with great similarity between earlier and later. Together they give the notion of something between unity and diversity - identity.

Now consider that frequently my observation is *not* sustained, uninterrupted. (Instead there is invariableness but with interruption, with gaps): the passage of the mind along a series of highly resemblant though interrupted impressions is very smooth, almost the same as along an uninterrupted series. So the imagination is fooled; we identify earlier with later parts of the series (in error). We imagine an uninterrupted something into the gap - substance, self, principle of identity, or somesuch.

** Identity, for Hume, links earlier and later phases of one uninterrupted

impression/perception. **

The artificiality of all this flows from Hume's acceptance of the view that the only things whose existence we have warrant to believe in are perceptions. Thus if anything is going to persist over time it will be a perception. But this is highly counter-intuitive - surely perceptions need a perceiver and last only as long as they are perceived - their *esse* is *percipi*.

***Treatise* I.iv.vi. 'Of Personal Identity'**

Is Hume here going to (attempt to) justify a belief? Or debunk it? Or just try to explain how we (wrongly) acquire it?

I think he thinks we are not justified either in believing in body or in believing in a persistent self. But you must decide for yourself.

Alas for a single, univocal, unanimous interpretation - he does (SB 255-258; NN I.iv.vi paras 7-14) give five conditions under which we (rightly?) ascribe identity to things:

- i) where change is relatively small
- ii) where change (however big) is gradual
- iii) where the same end is served/function performed

- iv) where the parts interact or depend on each other (even if the change of matter is total [in iii) or iv])])
- v) even where the successive things aren't resemblant (as in the case of the stone church which replaces the brick one)

Do we actually mix up qualitative (specific) and numerical identity as Hume fears?

Do we say 'this is the same thing as before' wherever we encounter a similar thing to an earlier one?

Hume was inclined to deny numerical identity wherever there are gaps, repetitions, parts - where number can be introduced. But this goes against what we intuitively think about counting. e.g. Eleven men or one team - it depends what you are talking about. Just because your body can be described as consisting of numerous limbs, parts and structures that doesn't prove it is no unity.

SB 251; NN I.iv.vi paras 1-3 **The idea of the self** - Hume regards this as empirically disproven (by introspection).

How does he know? If he has no idea of the self how does he know it is absent and not just something he fails to recognise for what it is?

NB He doesn't actually say that no impression of the self is possible but that he cannot find one and no one else has produced one. And if there is no impression of the self than there won't be a - genuine - idea of one either since a genuine idea has to be copied from an impression.

Since the self is thought by friends of the notion to be something that is never absent for any instant of my experience, if there were to be an impression of the self it would have to be invariably the same throughout experience.

"But there is no impression constant and invariable".

Hume is sarcastic - some philosophers may think they are aware of their 'self' but "I venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions." (SB p 252; NN I.iv.vi. para 4)

SB 253; NN para 4 - "The mind is a kind of theatre..." but it is what passes on stage (the perceptions only) "...that constitute the mind."

What holds the bundle together?

SB 259; NN para 16 - "a question naturally arises concerning this relation of [personal] identity; whether it be something that really binds our several perceptions together, or only associates their ideas in the imagination..."

i.e. WHAT HOLDS THE BUNDLE TOGETHER?

Two possibilities are mentioned in the passage -

- a real bond between the perceptions
- an imaginary one - an association of ideas in the imagination

The first of these is ruled out; it has " already been prov'd at large, that understanding never observes any real connection among objects." No idea has any necessary connection with any other. "Even the union of cause and effect, when strictly examin'd, resolves itself into a customary association of ideas."

That leaves the second answer (supposing the alternatives are just these two) i.e. "nothing really"- the 'bundle self' is held together by an imaginary tie, not a real one.

Wouldn't the natural answer to 'What holds the bundle of perceptions (and mental contents) together?' be 'The persistent body (especially the brain)?'

Obviously not for Hume who has ruled out persistent, independent objects different from perceptions.

If it is the imagination that holds person-bundles together its work will involve the usual three relations - contiguity, resemblance and cause and effect. (Contiguity, however, is said not to apply in this case.)

There will be lots of resemblance in an idea bundle or stream because there will be a good deal of memory of past perceptions and "what is the memory but the faculty by which we raise up the images [i.e. things which naturally resemble their object] of past perceptions" (SB 260; para 18).

"As to causation; ... the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are linked together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence and modify each other" (SB 261; para 19).

Objections

The story of the fiction that is personal identity is a story of the imagination being led to elide certain perceptions into one thing and to posit persistent principles where we have no evidence of the existence of such a lasting thing (in fact, our evidence [interruptedness] supports the opposite view.)

1) How do we distinguish - perceptions that constitute 'my objects' from perceptions that constitute my mind? According to Hume's account my imagination is being misled into both - running together perceptions to form an idea of persistent external objects

and - running together perceptions into a persistent me.

How does the imagination distinguish the two?

2) How are persons individuated on a bundle theory? How can one bundle be distinguished from another if the patterns of association and the resemblances happen to be similar?

3) And, anyway, isn't Hume just plain wrong that change of any and all sorts annihilates identity?? Surely single, self-identical items of all kinds can persist through change. This isn't just a fiction.

4) Also 'perceptions are ontologically independent entities' seems so counterintuitive as to need much more argument in its support than Hume ever gives. His view about the fictional character of identity is built on his theory of perceptions and his mental atomism which don't seem adequately defended.

5) And finally - how could perceptions create new perceptions; remember old ones; imagine persistence where there is none etc. These activities sound beyond the capacities of perceptions - even in bundles. Moreover Hume seems to be overworking the imagination...

6)...But it is not just overworked - **in order to be duped into positing a persistent self, surely the imagination has to be one.** Doesn't the imagination have to be outside the stream of perceptions, persisting parallel to it, to observe repetitions and be fooled by them into running perceptions together?

Appendix

The reprise of the discussion of personal identity in the Appendix is frankly mystifying:

What was Hume trying to do that he has now had second thoughts?

-- Was he trying to justify our belief in personal identity and now thinks he can't?

-- Does he feel he has failed fully to make out his case that belief in personal identity is an illusion or delusion?

-- Does he retract his bundle theory of the mind in the Appendix?

Look at the two principles -- SB 636; NN para 21 -- neither of which he wants to renounce:

(1) All our distinct perceptions are distinct existences.

(2) The mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences.

Are they inimical to his view that the persistent self is a fiction or to the view that belief in persistent persons is justifiable?

Is Hume's attitude ironic self-deprecation? or genuine perplexity and distress?

Are the two principles contradictory? inconsistent? (See Noonan p.211 for a forthright statement that they are not inconsistent.)