

Hume's Fictional Impression of Self

1. Introduction

Hume is famous for his discussion of personal identity. In Book I of the *Treatise* he argues that we do not have an idea of self based on a constant and invariable impression. Then in Book II of his *Treatise* he argues that "Tis evident that the idea or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us # \$ %T & . ' . ' . () . ' * n the surface these are contradictory positions to hold. This presents a puzzle. How can Hume say in Book I that we have no impression of self and then in Books II and III refer to a self as well as build his theories of the passions and morals around an idea of the self,

This paper sets out to solve this puzzle. In this paper I will distinguish between the !self\$ of Book I and the !self\$ of Book II. - hat I argue here is that Hume holds there are two types of personal identity. vulgar and philosophical. - hat is striking about Hume's position is that he argues that what we believe is the basis of our personal identity does not e/ist. - hat follows from this is that our idea of self is an idea that is grounded on a fictional impression and thus we lack personal identity in the sense in which we thought we possessed it. In arguing for my interpretation I will show that Hume utilizes the same methodology he uses with his study of causation to help elucidate the issue of personal identity. Finally I will indicate how this false belief in self is strong enough to support Hume's work in Books II and III of the *Treatise*.

2. Hume's Book I Account of Personal Identity

that observation Hume argues that every simple idea has a simple impression which resembles it and every simple impression a correspondent idea. Simple impressions are impressions that cannot be broken into constituent parts. Every idea is copied from some impression or impressions. This does not however mean that we cannot form an idea of something we have never seen. For example we can separate 'virtuousness' from our impression of Mother Theresa and 'horse' from Mr. Ford and combine those ideas to form an idea of 'virtuous horse'. We form an idea of something that we have never had an impression of (a virtuous horse) from other ideas copied from impressions we have experienced (virtue and horse).⁸

Given the Copy Principle when Hume inquires into where the idea of self was copied from he comes up empty-handed. Because we have an idea of personal identity (i.e. some kind of simple indivisible self that does not change over time) that simple idea should stem from some simple impression. However Hume's Book I discussion Of Personal Identity makes it clear that we have no idea of self that is based on such a single constant and invariable impression. Hume is looking for a single constant and invariable impression because that is what is commonly taken to make up the impression of self (i.e. when the vulgar speak of personal identity they believe that they possess some kind of unchanging core over time. However in Book I of the Treatise Hume argues that we never have an impression of self without a corresponding perception (i.e. we never only have an impression of the self rather we seem to only have an idea of self in relation to other perceptions e.g. the passions. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe any thing but the perception) (T.1.1.8).

= - e> are 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...There is properly no simplicity in it at

one time nor identity in different # %T '(<.).³

0II we observe when we introspect are perceptions followed by other perceptions which form bundles of perceptions. ?owhere in these bundles of perceptions do we find a simple idea of self nor an unchanging perception of self. If Hume argues this why does he then go on to ascribe personal identity to persons,

2.1 How We Conflate Sameness and i/ersity

6ven though Hume argues that we do not have an impression of self the vulgar believe we do.

- e see here that Hume thinks that the close relation among perceptions C namely the resemblance C causes us to believe that the perception is uninterrupted %see also. T ' (.&.8 ').

Looking at the role of belief^A in relation to identity when this idea of %feigned) identity is believed the idea is so lively that the idea resembles an impression. Hume says of belief generally

The effect then of belief is to raise up a simple idea to an e"quality wit# our impressions and bestow on it

second time resembles the book from a moment ago so perfectly that again (despite the distinctness of this new impression) the imagination can easily join that prior impression with the present by way of their resemblance. Thus we see that when causation, contiguity, and resemblance are joined with the workings of the imagination, we are able to join together disparate impressions and memories by feigning solid and unbroken connections among them.

The key to what makes our present self resemble our past self(s) is that the self is taken as a set of memories. - hen I look at my present set of memories, that set is sufficiently similar to the set of memories I had yesterday, as well as the set of memories from a week before. The set of memories I have today so closely resembles and appears contiguous to the set of memories I had yesterday that I unconsciously or automatically assume they are the same set (just as I assume the tree in the front yard today is the same one from yesterday's i.e. there is an apparent continuity of memory). The assumption of personal identity in this manner is the natural or default state for us (the vulgar). - hen we are unreflectively going about our day to day business, our imagination naturally and automatically joins together objects that resemble one another as well as sets of perceptions that resemble one another. - hen Hume refers to 'personal identity' or the 'self' in Book II, it is this unreflective notion of self that he is referring to (not the philosophical notion of self that he dismissed earlier in Book I).

3. The Self of Book II: Hume's redefinition of "Self"

Turning to Hume's second notion of identity, I argue that in Book II Hume has continued his discussion of the self using the vulgar (fictional) notion of identity. Towards the end of Part I, Section VI of Book I, Hume poses a question:

The question naturally arises concerning this relation of identity: whether it be something that really binds our several perceptions together, or only associates their ideas in the imagination. That is, in other words, whether in pronouncing concerning the identity of a person, we observe some real bond among his perceptions, or only feel one among the ideas we form of them (T, 1.2.7, emphasis).

Because for Hume, the imagination never observes any real connection among objects, we have no

feigned and even call it 'personal identity'. That is when an object's cohesive parts are so closely related the imagination jumps to the conclusion that the object is indivisible and unchanging. But we should take care to notice as Hume points out in the second quote above now that he has shown that since our impression of personal identity is unconsciously feigned all arguments about (simple and unchanging) personal identity fall apart insofar as Hume has redefined 'personal identity' to mean something other than the philosophical notion (namely the vulgar notion or feeling). Because the imagination easily transitions to an idea of unity and this is our default state when we speak of 'identity' we must be clear on what definition we are using (either the strict philosophical sense or the vulgar fictional sense). Hume has shown that we do not have personal identity if what we take to constitute personal identity is a simple and unchanging self. However if we take personal identity to be a natural belief based on the propensity of the imagination to link distinct perceptions together we do have that belief that we are simple and unchanging.

So when Hume says the impression of ourselves is always intimately present to us he is referring to the vulgar notion of self as it regards our well being (not a self that is simple and unchanging).^H

which we feign necessary connection is very similar to the way in which we feign identity. Just as the perception of constant conjunction produces a habit of the mind that gives us a feeling we come to call 'necessary connection' so does the perception of resembling bundles of ideas produce a habit of the mind that gives us a feeling of 'self' or 'personal identity'. Both of these habits and resulting feelings happen even though we have no impression of either.¹⁸ Hume says of necessary connection

as we have no idea that is not deriv'd from an impression we must find some impression that gives rise to this idea of necessity if we assert we have such an idea. (T 1.8.1)

and of the simple self and personal identity

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very existence which is pleaded for them nor have we any idea of the self after the manner it is here explained. For from what impression could this idea be deriv'd, (T 1.8.2)

- we see that in both cases Hume's methodology is the same. Hume is searching for an impression that is the foundation of the respective idea (i.e. necessary connection or identity). Hume finds that in both cases we cannot trace the idea back to an impression. What Hume finds at base in both cases is a feeling.

There is nothing in any objects to persuade us that they are either always remote or always contiguous and when from experience and observation we discover that their relation in this particular is invariable we always conclude there is some secret cause which separates or unites them. The same reasoning extends to identity. - we readily suppose an object may continue individually the same tho' several times absent from and present to the senses and ascribe to it an identity notwithstanding the interruption of the perception (T 1.8.3)

But if we go any further and ascribe a power or necessary connection to these objects this is what we can never observe in them but must draw the idea of it from what we feel internally in contemplating them (T 1.8.4) (my emphasis)

feeling of an impression and it is that feeling that makes these ideas have the motivating power that they do. In the case of both necessary connection and personal identity Hume takes the same methodological approach. Because of the copy principle Hume is looking for an impression that grounds a particular idea (necessary connection or personal identity). In the case of necessary connection and personal identity he cannot find an impression of to ground either idea. Ultimately

our identity with regard to the passions serves to corroborate that with regard to the imagination & y
ma\$in(distant perceptions influence eac# ot#er and by giving us a present concern for our past or future
pleasures.\$ %T ' .(< . 'H my emphasis)

Because our notion of self is so strong regarding the passions that belief&feeling helps strengthen the
connections between our dis@ointed perceptions that the imagination has @oined together. That is
identity with regard to the passions reinforces the prior work of the imagination. So whereas personal
identity in relation to the understanding is feigned by resemblance contiguity and cause and effect
%recall the Book I discussion) the felt&believed notion of self is so effective in influencing the passions
that this movement helps strengthen our prior feigned notion of the self as well as our concern for past
and future pleasures and pains.

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