

Man Has No Identical Self

by David Hume

There are some philosophers who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our Self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. The strongest sensation, the most violent passion, say they, instead of distracting us from this view, only fix it the more intensely, and make us consider their influence on *self* either by their pain or pleasure. To attempt a farther proof of this were to weaken its evidence; since no proof can be derived from any fact, of which we are so intimately conscious; nor is there any thing, of which we can be certain, if we doubt of this.

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very experience, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of *self* after the manner it is here explained. For from what impression could this idea be derived? This question it is impossible to answer without a manifest contradiction and absurdity; and yet it is a question, which must necessarily be answered, if we would have the idea of self pass for clear and intelligible, It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea.

But farther, what must become of all our particular perceptions upon this hypothesis? All these are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately considered, and may exist separately, and have no Deed of tiny thing to support their existence. After what manner, therefore, do they belong to self; and how are they connected with it? For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call *myself*, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or 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 any thing but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time, as by sound sleep; so long am I insensible of *myself*, and may truly be said not to exist. And were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. If any one, upon serious and unprejudiced reflection thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I call reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continued, which he calls *himself*; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.

But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they 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. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions. Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively

41 make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and
42 situations. There is properly no *simplicity* in it at one time, nor *identity* in different; whatever natural
43 propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not
44 mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant
45 notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed.

46 What then gives us so great a propension to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to
47 suppose ourselves possess of an invariable and uninterrupted existence through the whole course of our
48 lives? . . .

49 We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted through a supposed
50 variation of time; and this idea we call that of *identity* or *sameness*. We have also a distinct idea of several
51 different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation; and this to an accurate
52 view affords as perfect a notion of *diversity*, as if there was no manner of relation among the objects. But
53 though these two ideas of identity, and a succession of related objects be in themselves perfectly distinct,
54 and even contrary, yet it is certain, that in our common way of thinking they are generally confounded with
55 each other. That action of the imagination, by which we consider the uninterrupted and invariable object,
56 and that by which we reflect on the succession of related objects, are almost the same to the feeling, nor is
57 there much more effort of thought required in the latter case than in the former. The relation facilitates the
58 transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage as smooth as if it contemplated
59 one continued object. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute
60 the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects. However at one instant we may consider the
61 related succession as variable or interrupted, we are sure the next to ascribe to it a perfect identity, and
62 regard it as enviable and uninterrupted. Our propensity to this mistake is so great from the resemblance
63 above-mentioned, that we fall into it before we are aware; and though we incessantly correct ourselves by
64 reflection, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or
65 take off this bias from the imagination. Our last resource is to yield to it, and boldly assert that these
66 different related objects are in effect the same, however interrupted and variable. In order to justify to
67 ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle, that connects the objects
68 together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus we feign the continued existence of the
69 perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption: and run into the notion of a *soul*, and *self*, and
70 *substance*, to disguise the variation. But we may farther observe, that where we do not give rise to such a
71 fiction, our propension to confound identity with relation is so great, that we are apt to imagine something
72 unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts, beside their relation; and this I take to be the case with
73 regard to the identity we ascribe to plants and vegetables. And even when this does not take place, we still
74 feel a propensity to confound these ideas, though we are not able fully to satisfy ourselves in that particular,
75 nor find any thing invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity.

76 Thus the controversy concerning identity is not merely a dispute of words. For when we attribute identity, in
77 an improper sense, to variable or interrupted objects, our mistake is not confined to the expression, but is
78 commonly attended with a fiction, either of something invariable and uninterrupted, or of something
79 mysterious and inexplicable, or at least with a propensity to such fictions. . . .

80 We now proceed to explain the nature of *personal identity* . . .

81 It is evident, that the identity, which we attribute to the human mind, however perfect we may imagine it to
82 be, is not able to run the several different perceptions into one, and make them lose their characters of
83 distinction and difference, which are essential to them. It is still true, that every distinct perception, which
84 enters into the composition of the mind, is a distinct existence, and is different, and distinguishable, and
85 separable from every other perception, either contemporary or successive. But, as, notwithstanding this
86 distinction and separability, we suppose the whole train of perceptions to be united by identity, a question
87 naturally arises concerning this relation of identity; whether it be something that really binds our several
88 perceptions together, or only associates their ideas in the imagination. That is, in other words, whether in
89 pronouncing concerning the identity of a person, we observe some real bond among his perceptions, or only
90 feel one among the ideas we form of them. This question we might easily decide, if we would recollect what
91 has been already said at large, that the understanding never observes any real connexion among objects,
92 and that even the union of cause and effect, when strictly examined, resolves itself into a customary
93 association of ideas. For from thence it evidently follows, that identity is nothing really belonging to these
94 different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them,
95 because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them. Now the only qualities,
96 which can give ideas an union in the imagination, are these three relations above-mentioned. There are the
97 uniting principles in the ideal world, and without them every distinct object is separable by the mind, and
98 may be separately considered, and appears not to have any more connexion with any other object, than if
99 disjoined by the greatest difference and remoteness. It is, therefore, on some of these three relations of
100 resemblance, contiguity and causation, that identity depends; and as the very essence of these relations
101 consists in their producing an easy transition of ideas; it follows, that our notions of personal identity,
102 proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected
103 ideas, according to the principles above-explained.

104 The only question, therefore, which remains, is, by what relations this uninterrupted progress of our thought
105 is produced, when we consider the successive existence of a mind or thinking person. And here it is evident
106 we must confine ourselves to resemblance and causation, and must drop contiguity, which has little or no
107 influence in the present case.

108 To begin with *resemblance*; suppose we could see clearly into the breast of another, and observe that
109 succession of perceptions, which constitutes his mind or thinking principle, and suppose that he always
110 preserves the memory of a considerable part of past perceptions; it is evident that nothing could more
111 contribute to the bestowing a relation on this succession amidst all its variations. For what is the memory
112 but a faculty, by which we raise up the images of past perceptions? And as an image necessarily resembles
113 its object, must not the frequent placing of these resembling perceptions in the chain of thought, convey the
114 imagination more easily from one link to another, and make the whole seem like the continuance of one
115 object? In this particular, then, the memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its
116 production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions. The case is the same whether
117 we consider ourselves or others.

118 As to *causation*; we may observe, that the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of
119 different perceptions or different existences, which are linked together by the relation of cause and effect,
120 and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their
121 correspondent ideas; said these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another,
122 and draws after it a third, by which it is expelled in its turn. In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more

123 properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the
124 reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same
125 republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its
126 members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and
127 disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures,
128 his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation. And in this view our identity with regard to
129 the passions serves to corroborate that with regard to the imagination, by the making our distant
130 perceptions influence each other, and by giving us a present concern for our past or future pains or
131 pleasures.

132 As a memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, it is to
133 be considered, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never
134 should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute
135 our self or person. But having once acquired this notion of causation from the memory, we can extend the
136 same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of persons beyond our memory, and can comprehend
137 times, and circumstances, and actions, which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have
138 existed. . . . In this view, therefore, memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity, by
139 shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. It will be incumbent on those,
140 who affirm that memory produces entirely our personal identity, to give a reason why we can thus extend
141 our identity beyond our memory.

142 The whole of this doctrine leads us to a conclusion, which is of great importance in the present affair, viz.
143 that all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided.

Excerpted from *A Treatise of Human Nature*, by David Hume (1739), Book I, Part 4. Found at <http://www.radicalacademy.com/adiphiloessay275.htm> on 10/24/10.

Study Guide

1. Be able to restate/summarize Hume's argument succinctly.
2. Compare Hume's argument to Descartes' "Cogito." What effect does it have on Cartesian "foundationalism"?
3. Relate Hume's argument to Nietzsche's doctrines of "there is no original text" and the Death of God.
4. The studies and practice of psychology, psychotherapy and psychiatry all are based on the reality of the human self. Discuss Hume's argument in relation to this.
5. Discuss: mental activity does not have a mental foundation (or self), according to Hume, but do people think there is such a thing as an individual self because thinking seems to take place in an individual body? Relate this problem to Cartesian dualism (the mind-body problem).
6. Compare Hume's argument to the Buddhist doctrine of no-self and its implications for a person's life.
7. Compare Hume's argument to Heraclitus' idea that the cosmos is a stream of incessant change, not a congeries of things. Also compare it to the Mahayana doctrine of emptiness.
8. Relate Hume's argument to Aristotle's doctrine of substance.
9. Can Hume's view be reconciled with the evidence supplied by empty-mind meditation?

Addendum:

Neuroscientist Sam Harris on thinking and the sense of personal identity:

SAM HARRIS

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We are Lost in Thought

I invite you to pay attention to anything — the sight of this text, the sensation of breathing, the feeling of your body resting against your chair — for a mere sixty seconds without getting distracted by discursive thought. It sounds simple enough: Just pay attention. The truth, however, is that you will find the task impossible. If the lives of your children depended on it, you could not focus on anything — even the feeling of a knife at your throat — for more than a few seconds, before your awareness would be submerged again by the flow of thought. This forced plunge into unreality is a problem. In fact, it is the problem from which every other problem in human life appears to be made.

I am by no means denying the importance of thinking. Linguistic thought is indispensable to us. It is the basis for planning, explicit learning, moral reasoning, and many other capacities that make us human. Thinking is the substance of every social relationship and cultural institution we have. It is also the foundation of science. But our habitual identification with the flow of thought — that is, our failure to recognize thoughts *as thoughts*, as transient appearances in consciousness — is a primary source of human suffering and confusion.

Our relationship to our own thinking is strange to the point of paradox, in fact. When we see a person walking down the street talking to himself, we generally assume that he is mentally ill. But we all talk to ourselves *continuously* — we just have the good sense to keep our mouths shut. Our lives in the present can scarcely be glimpsed through the veil of our discursivity: We tell ourselves what just happened, what almost happened, what should have happened, and what might yet happen. We ceaselessly reiterate our hopes and fears about the future. Rather than simply exist as ourselves, we seem to presume a relationship with ourselves. It's as though we are having a conversation with an imaginary friend possessed of infinite patience. Who are we talking to?

While most of us go through life feeling that we are the thinker of our thoughts and the experiencer of our experience, from the perspective of science we know that this is a distorted view. There is no discrete self or ego lurking like a minotaur in the labyrinth of the brain. There is no region of cortex or pathway of neural processing that occupies a privileged position with respect to our personhood. There is no unchanging "center of narrative gravity" (to use Daniel Dennett's phrase). In subjective terms, however, there *seems* to be one — to most of us, most of the time.

The piece by Harris was found at http://www.edge.org/q2011/q11_12.html#harriss on January 20, 2011.