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

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

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

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

We now proceed to explain the nature of personal identity . . .
It is evident, that the identity, which we attribute to the human mind, however perfect we may imagine it to
be, is not able to run the several different perceptions into one, and make them lose their characters of
distinction and difference, which are essential to them. It is still true, that every distinct perception, which
enters into the composition of the mind, is a distinct existence, and is different, and distinguishable, and
separable from every other perception, either contemporary or successive. But, as, notwithstanding this
distinction and separability, we suppose the whole train of perceptions to be united by identity, a 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. This question we might easily decide, if we would recollect what
has been already proud at large, that the understanding never observes any real connexion among objects,
and that even the union of cause and effect, when strictly examined, resolves itself into a customary
association of ideas. For from thence it evidently follows, that identity is nothing really belonging to these
different perceptions, and uniting them together; but is merely a quality, which we attribute to them,
because of the union of their ideas in the imagination, when we reflect upon them. Now the only qualities,
which can give ideas an union in the imagination, are these three relations above-mentioned. There are the
uniting principles in the ideal world, and without them every distinct object is separable by the mind, and
may be separately considered, and appears not to have any more connexion with any other object, than if
disjoined by the greatest difference and remoteness. It is, therefore, on some of these three relations of
resemblance, contiguity and causation, that identity depends; and as the very essence of these relations
consists in their producing an easy transition of ideas; it follows, that our notions of personal identity,
proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted progress of the thought along a train of connected
ideas, according to the principles above-explained.

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

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

As to causation; we may observe, that 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. Our impressions give rise to their
correspondent ideas; said these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another,
and draws after it a third, by which it is expelled in its turn. In this respect, I cannot compare the soul more
properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the
reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same
republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its
members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and
disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures,
his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation. And in this view our identity with regard to
the passions serves to corroborate that with regard to the imagination, by the making our distant
perceptions influence each other, and by giving us a present concern for our past or future pains or
pleasures.

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

The whole of this doctrine leads us to a conclusion, which is of great importance in the present affair, viz.
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

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).
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](http://www.edge.org/q2011/q11_12.html#harriss) on January 20, 2011.