

## 7.6 Personal Identity

### 7.6.1 Readings and Study Questions

- Readings: Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, selections from section 6, LMP, pp. 102-106
- Study questions (From Tim O’Keefe):
  1. Why does Hume think that we are not aware of the self in our experience, and have no idea of the self? What effect (if any) do you think Hume’s “no-self” doctrine has upon Descartes’ cogito? Do you think Hume is correct?
  2. Why does Hume think that it is a mistake to attribute identity over time to some object (such as a ship), and why do we make this mistake? Do you agree with Hume? (If you wish, discuss what effect you think this has on the notion of substance, as used by Descartes.)
  3. Why does Hume think that, strictly speaking, the “identity, which we attribute to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one,” and that the mind is best compared to a republic or commonwealth? Do you agree with Hume?

### 7.6.2 Against Descartes – Definition of the self

- **Target:** Descartes and his claim of our consciousness of the self, i.e of:
  1. its existence
  2. its persistence
  3. its unity
  4. its simplicity
- Application of the **Copy Principle** of a criterion of meaning: from what impression is the idea of the self derived?

NOTE: Because of the unity and the simplicity of the self, we must find a UNIQUE impression, now and over the complete duration of life

- **Claim: There is no such impression**
  - We have no unique, constant and invariable impression of the self that could give rise to a unique, constant and invariable self.
  - Given this, and contra Descartes, if the self is anything, it is the thing to which several impressions are referred.
- With the above, Hume has:
  - raised an objection against Descartes
  - started on his own analysis of the self (multiple impressions)
- *Comment:* Hume objects here to Descartes. Descartes holds that we have a clear and distinct idea of a unique and stable self. Hume claims that this could be true *only if we could find a unique and stable impression from which to derive the idea of the self.* Why does he think he can require this?? One can distinguish 2 elements:
  1. As we know, Hume and Descartes understand the notion of clear and distinct idea in very different ways. For Descartes, a clear and distinct idea is reached by an intuition of the mind alone. By contrast, Hume holds that our ideas originate in our impressions, and that, the closer an idea is to the impression, the clearer it is. Given the latter characterization of what makes an idea clear and distinct, Hume can say that we have a clear and distinct idea of the self only if we can find an impression from which the idea of the self can be almost directly derived.
  2. Second element: ‘in order to have an idea of a unique and constant X, we need a unique and constant impression of X’

Of course, this is impossible to realize.

Note however that this relies heavily on the copy principle, that is, the principle according to which our ideas are mere copies of impressions. Because of the copy principle, all the characteristics of a clear idea must be found in the impression from which the idea has been derived (there is no input outside of the impression). From a strong principle then, Hume derives a strong constraint, which makes the clear and distinct idea of a constant and unique self simply empty.

Is this assumption correct? Do all characteristics of an idea correspond to elements in our experience?

ex: the idea of one building, or the idea of one organism: the idea of the unity of these objects does not derive from a unique and simple impression of their unity. Rather it derives from the observation of tight connections between the parts.

So, it seems that if we accept Hume's view, then a building or an organism has no unity. This seems unacceptable.

- **Hume considers the objection** above in the case of the self: Could our several impressions be connected in such a way that we grasp an idea of a unique and constant self? Hume answers by the negative:

Arguments:

1. all our internal perception are different, exist separately and independent from one another
2. we do not perceive "ourselves" but through particular internal perceptions

This is equivalent to:

- all we grasp from the self is a particular perception
- we do not grasp anything of the self when we have no perception

Argument for this premise: sound sleep and lost of the self

*Comment:* This is a very strong claim – do you agree that we have access to the self only through internal perceptions? What do you think of the argument that we loose our consciousness of our self in sound sleep?

- **So, the result is:** the only thing from which we can derive the idea of the self are disconnected and independent impressions.

Hence, Hume's definition of the self:

"a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux or movement" (103)

Theatre analogy, but with no stage!

The self = constant flux of disconnected and independent perceptions and thoughts

NO SIMPLICITY, NO IDENTITY

- This is certainly highly controversial and against common sense. The idea is the self seems to be share by most of us. So, Hume must say more about it...

### 7.6.3 Where does the idea of the unique self come from?

Distinction:

1. personal identity – concerning thought and imagination
2. personal identity – concerning passions

We are concerned with 1.

#### Identity of an object

We must account for the identity of objects before we can account for ours.

**Assumption:** Hume requires that the notion of identity requires exact sameness in all characters.

**Argument:** no object that we take to possess an identity possess the same characters at all times

1. He claims that the idea of identity has the same cognitive content as the idea of diversity: a succession of related properties.
2. Because of 1., it is simply a *mistake* to substitute identity in place of diversity in some cases
3. He rejects the Aristotelian notion of substance – that is, what, in a given object, remains identical through changes and defines the essence of this object – as an absurdity, a unintelligible fiction

**Conclusion:** the controversy over identity is a “dispute of words”, that is to say, it is just a dispute due to our misuse of words – in this case, we misuse the word ‘identity’ in the sense that we use it as referring to something different from what the word ‘diversity’ refers to, whereas these words really both refer to the same empirical experience.

**Hume's view:** 2 claims:

- Claim: “all objects. to which we ascribe identity, without observing their invariableness and uninterruptedness, are such as consist of a succession of related objects.

Note that this amounts to a tremendous number of objects !!

- Claim: We ascribe identity whenever there is a continuity of the thought.
  - small and great changes – continuity of the thought and hence our idea of identity is destroyed by great changes – relative to us, not objective
  - small and great changes are defined *relatively* to the greatness of the object – again, relativity – not objective
  - gradual change – recall the ship of theseus
  - Aristotle final causes and sympathy of the parts – according to Hume, this is us imposing our ideas on the external reality, not us discovering identity in the external reality

All these facts about how we ascribe identity to objects support the idea that the notion of identity is *in the mind only and does not correspond to anything objective*.

### Personal identity

As usual, Hume's account of personal identity includes two parts: a negative one and a positive one.

**Negative part** The application of the same method yields a similar result:

The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetables and animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects (105)

So: the idea of personal identity is in our mind only, does not correspond to anything objective: it comes from our minds' conceiving various independent impressions as related.

**Positive part** By what relations is produced our idea of personal identity?

1. *Resemblance*: we produce our idea of personal identity thanks to the resemblance of our current sensations that we gain through our senses with our past sensations that we keep in our memories.  
Example: you see a similar face and a similar body every morning  
Thought experiment: change of memory : who is who??
2. *Causation*: we produce our idea of personal identity through causal reasoning. By observation of the constant conjunction of some events, we take that there are causal relationships between these events. We then take these causal relationship to “exist” objectively and to constitute the structure of our identity. We consider that the structure remains the same through the various changes that undertake the components.

Example: whatever the cell changes in your brain and in your arm, you still consider that your brain commands your arm to rise.

*The self as a commonwealth or republic*: the individuals change, but the relations between the individuals remain the same. Typically, whoever is the president, he has the same relation to the House of Representatives, the Senate, and the citizens.

**Consequence**: no personal identity without memory

- Our memory is necessary to think in terms of causal relations.
- Causal relations are necessary to make up the idea of personal identity.

Hence, our memory is necessary to ascribe ourselves a personal identity.

That said, memory is not sufficient: we ascribe our personal identity beyond our memory (by ascribing causal relations between impressions)

#### 7.6.4 Discussion over the notion of identity

##### Identity of the components and the Ship of Theseus

Hume’s criticism of the notion of identity relies on the heavy following assumption: an object  $X_1$  is identical to  $X_2$  if and only if all the components of  $X_2$  are the same as the components of  $X_1$

This seems a very strong requirement. A classical paradox that shows that there must be something wrong with this notion of identity: *The ship of Theseus*

I take here Marc Cohen's description of the paradox:

**MTI** stands for Mereological Theory of Identity : the view that there is identity if and only if there is identity of the parts – that is, Hume's requirement.

Beginning of quote: from Marc Cohen, <http://faculty.washington.edu/smcohen/320/theseus.html> – this material is copyrighted, I quote it with the authorization of the author.

This is a puzzle that has been around since antiquity, probably later than Heraclitus, but not much later. It first surfaces in print in Plutarch (*Vita Thesei*, 22-23):

The ship wherein Theseus and the youth of Athens returned had thirty oars, and was preserved by the Athenians down even to the time of Demetrius Phalereus, for they took away the old planks as they decayed, putting in new and stronger timber in their place, insomuch that this ship became a standing example among the philosophers, for the logical question of things that grow; one side holding that the ship remained the same, and the other contending that it was not the same.

Plutarch tells us that the ship was exhibited during the time [i.e., lifetime] of Demetrius Phalereus, which means ca. 350-280 BCE. (Demetrius was a well-known Athenian and a member of the Peripatetic school, i.e., a student of Aristotle. He wrote some 45 books, and was also a politician).

The original puzzle is this: over the years, the Athenians replaced each plank in the original ship of Theseus as it decayed, thereby keeping it in good repair. Eventually, there was not a single plank left of the original ship. So, did the Athenians still have one and the same ship that used to belong to Theseus?

But we can liven it up a bit by considering two different, somewhat modernized, versions. On both versions, the replacing of the planks takes place while the ship is at sea. We are to imagine that Theseus sails away, and then systematically replaces each plank on board with a new one. (He carries a complete supply of new parts on board as his cargo.) Now we can consider these two versions of the story:

1. Simple version: Theseus completely rebuilds his ship, replaces all the parts, throws the old ones overboard. Does he arrive on the same ship as the one he left on? Of course it has changed. But is it it?

Let  $A$  = the ship Theseus started his voyage on.

Let  $B$  = the ship Theseus finished his voyage on.

Our question then is: Does  $A = B$ ? If not, why not? Suppose he had left one original part in. Is that enough to make  $A$  identical to  $B$ ? If not, suppose he had left two, etc. Where do you draw the line?

2. Complex version: Like the simple version, but with one addition – following Theseus in another boat is the Scavenger, who picks up the pieces Theseus throws overboard, and uses them to rebuild his boat. The Scavenger arrives in port in a ship composed of precisely the parts that composed the ship Theseus started out in. He docks his ship right next to one that Theseus docked.

Now we have:

$C$  = the ship the Scavenger finished his voyage on.

Our problem is to sort out the identity (and non-identity) relations among  $A$ ,  $B$ , and  $C$ . The only obvious fact is that  $B \neq C$  (after all, they are berthed side by side in the harbor, so they can hardly be one and the same ship!). Beyond that, there are two alternatives:

1. MTI tells us that  $A = C$ . The ship on which Theseus started his voyage, namely  $A$ , is identical to the ship on which the Scavenger finished his voyage, namely  $C$ . So we have two ships: one ( $A$ ) that was sailed out by Theseus and ( $C$ ) sailed in by the Scavenger, and another one ( $B$ ) that was created (out of new parts) during the voyage and was sailed into port by Theseus.
2. The alternative is to abandon MTI and hold that  $A = B$ . On this account, we still have two ships, but their identity and non-identity relations are different: one ship ( $A$ ) was sailed out by Theseus and ( $B$ ) sailed in by Theseus, and another one ( $C$ ) was created (out of used parts) during the voyage and was sailed into port by the Scavenger.

Unfortunately, both alternatives lead to unintuitive consequences.



1. The problem with alternative (i) is that it requires Theseus to have changed ships during the voyage. For he ends up on B, which is clearly not identical to C. But Theseus never once got off his ship during its entire voyage: Theseus got on board a ship (A), sailed a voyage during which he never got off the ship, and arrived at his destination in a ship (B). He was on just one ship during the whole process, but alternative (i) seems to require that he was on (at least!) two different ships.
2. The problem with alternative (ii) is that in holding that  $A = B$  and admitting (as it must) that  $B \neg C$ , it must also hold that  $A \neg C$ . Yet every part of A is a part of C, and every part of C is a part of A! So A and C are two different ships even though their parts are the same; and what of A and B? They have no parts in common, and yet A and B are the same ship.

These results seem as paradoxical as the view that there are no persisting objects.

Conclusion: MTI seems too strong. It denies identity to objects that we think of as persisting through time. But that leaves us with some problems:

1. What do we replace it with? Spatio-temporal continuity (the intuition behind our alternative (ii), above) is the most promising (and common) suggestion. A persisting object must trace a continuous path through space-time. And tracing a continuous path is compatible with a change of parts, so long as the change is gradual and the form or shape of the object is preserved through the changes of its component materials. So it appears that we can replace MTI with the theory of spatio-temporal continuity (STC).
2. But STC is also problematic. For it is easy to imagine cases in which our intuitions tell us that we have numerical identity without spatio-temporal continuity. Consider that an object can be disassembled and then reassembled. (Think of a bicycle that is taken apart. The parts are then placed in a number of separate boxes, which are then shipped, separately, across country. The boxes are then unpacked and the bicycle is reassembled.) How do we account for its identity? STC breaks down in this case, for there is no continuously existing bicycle-shaped object tracing a smooth path through space-time. But MTI gives us the right result: the reassembled bicycle is made of exactly the same parts as the one that was taken apart, and so is numerically the same bicycle.

In fact, there is a way of describing the case of Theseus's ship that seems to demand MTI rather than STC. Suppose the ship (A) is in a museum, and a clever ring of thieves is trying to steal the ship by removing its pieces one at a time and then reassembling them. Each day, the thieves remove another piece, and replace it with a look-alike. When they have removed all the original pieces, we are left with this situation. There is a ship, B, that is in the museum (made of all new materials), and there is a ship, C, in the possession of the thieves (the original pieces of A now reassembled). Which ship is A (Theseus's original ship)? Surely not B, just a copy of A, left behind in the museum by the crooks to cover up their crime. It is C that will interest the antique dealer who is interested in buying A, the original ship.

End of quote

### Notions of Identity

- We have already seen and explored a little two notions of identity:
  - Identity of the components – MIT
  - Spatio-temporal continuity – STC

We have seen that MIT is inadequate. STC seems a better option. That said, STC seems not completely adequate either. The cases of the bicycle and of an art piece for a museum are paradigmatic.

- Note that if we relax STC so that to accommodate the cases of the bicycle or the art piece, then STC becomes too weak.

Consider the case of the bicycle. Certainly, you can follow the various parts of the bicycle through spacetime and show that all of them are back together. So, the criterion of spacetime continuity could be relaxed so that to accommodate the possibility that parts of one thing travel through spacetime separately and come back together.

The problem in that case is that STC becomes too weak: if we dismantle an object and send the parts all over the world, do we really think that its identity is preserved.

- So, what we have is:
  - STC seems important but too weak
  - MTI is too strong

- What we have to do then is:
  - to take STC as a necessary element of identity
  - formulate other criteria, similar to MIT but weaker, for defining identity

We know that to require the identity of all the parts of two objects will not work for identifying two objects. What about requiring the identity of some of the parts, say the most important ones, i.e. the ones that are truly defining these objects?

- The question then becomes: what makes something that we know has numerical identity and spatiotemporal continuity stay the same?

The question is too broad as it is. Let us try to sketch various answers for personal identity:

1. Mental features?
2. Body features?

