

An Epistemic Reflection on David Hume's Notion of the Self

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Abstract

We hear people talk about the self as referring to an enduring existent entity amidst series of changes in an individual over time. Whether such an enduring self truly exists, has become a subject of serious debate amongst philosophers of mind. This debate in philosophy of mind is known as the problem of personal identity. David Hume is one philosopher who is opposed to the fact that, there is any thing called the self, rather, what we perceive or could perceive are nothing but bundles or chains of perceptions to impressions. Hence, the need for a critical reflection on Hume's Theory of the Self cannot be overemphasized. This paper adopted the philosophical method of exposition critical analysis of terms and argumentation to ensuring balanced and logical presentation of ideas. The paper uncovered that Hume was right to an extent that it will take an infinite regress to attempt to establish a position for the existence of self (personal identity) amidst changes over a long period of time. However, the paper concluded that, with the various criticism levelled against Hume's notion of the self, shows that there exists a self (personal identity) which is difficult to establish objectively, but exist as a particular inherent in a universal.

Keywords: Self, Personal
identity, Impressions,
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Introduction

The Concept of self has been viewed or perceived differently by scholars of Philosophy. The rationalists view the Self as something abstract and not sensible while the empiricists hold a contrary view. David Hume is of the class of the empiricists. In this work, we are concerned with an examination of what the self is, as postulated by David Hume, a Scottish philosopher. Hume argues that the idea of self is fictitious and it is made up of a 'bundle' of different perceptions.¹ Also, Hume believes that the concept of self is a result of a continued and unbroken chain of perceptions. He maintained that even when the object of our thought is 'supposed to continue and preserve perfect identity throughout a supposed variation', the relationship or connectedness of any given set of perceptions is ultimately what gives us a sense of identity. As far as substance is concerned, Hume made an important distinction between material and mental beings.² He said that the concept of substance as an original existent in the world is simply an illusion or fiction because no matter how much 'an idea of an existent distinct from it is attached to any term', there is no abstract reasoning that can lead us to knowledge of the existence of the term and the absence of its term.

David Hume was best known for his famous political, moral, and literary works. He was a philosopher who supported the "Experientialist" theory which suggests that learners construct knowledge and develop skills through active engagement with real-world experiences and reflection on those experiences. According to him (Hume), knowledge is an awareness along with evidence. If there is no evidence for enlightening, we can't have knowledge. He assumed intellectual philosophy, rational thought, and moral philosophy, putting moral in the reason, would destroy human's life and provide no valuable experience.³ In his theory, there are two kinds of life within the universe. They are life in the human world and life in the other world. Hume was a person of unique thinking and he was classified as a materialist. Materialism is a belief that there is no God and soul, and that anything that is spiritual doesn't exist in the world. Also, everything on the earth is consisting of matter. There were no such things as miracles in this material world. Hume supported this claim "lived a life consistent with the world as it or we perceived it". So, he was against most of the western philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle. According to Hume: "We live in the world as it is and we believe in this natural world rather than the world of our experiences".⁴ This claim is matching with his materialist thinking.

1. David Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature* (Oxford: Clearendon Press, 2014), 1.4.6.3.

2. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1.4.6.69

3. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1.4.6.18

4. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1.4.6.6

David Hume's Theory of the Self

The concept of the self is a topic that is core to many areas of philosophy because it is so intuitive to us all. It, rather obviously, is based around the idea of 'self', the thing we consider to be a person. However, since we all have our own self, a lot of things that are intuitive to us when we think about 'self' become difficult to answer.

Hume begins his Philosophy with an analysis of our perceptions. These are simply the contents of Consciousness (what Descartes and Locke called Ideas). But introspection shows us that perceptions fall into two classes. For example, there is the experience of warmth we have when lying on the beach in the summer. But when we are enduring the chilling blasts of a winter wind, that previous experience of warmth is only a dim memory. The warmth as remembered or imagined is a copy of the original experience but differs from it in the degree of force or liveliness.⁵ Hume argues that the idea of self is fictitious and it is made up of a 'bundle' of different perceptions. Hume believes that the concept of self is a result of a continued and unbroken chain of perceptions.⁶

Hume's account of the self is found in his work '*A Treatise of Human Nature*'. Hume starts by 'splitting' perceptions into two different groups: those of ideas and those of impressions. Ideas are the faint images of impressions present in thinking and reasoning while impressions are all our sensations, passions, emotions as they make their first appearance in the soul.⁷ Hume gives the example of the idea of a golden mountain in order to have the idea of a golden mountain, one must have the simple ideas of golden things and mountainous things and then form the idea of a golden mountain from those two. Ideas are divided into those of memory and those of imagination. Impressions are distinct from ideas in that they are much livelier and involve some kind of 'actual' disturbance to the mind.

Subsequently, Hume draws our attention to the fact that whenever we try to introspect and consider what the self is, we never 'catch it out'. We only find a collection of perceptions. This issue can be demonstrated through considering an experience. For instance, one moment you might hear some music, and in the next moment you might look at a red apple. Hume points out that when we introspect to try and find the self, what we actually experience are the distinct perceptions of the sound and then the vision of the apple. Hume concludes that there is no simple, consistent self to be found. He says that the self is just a

⁵. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1.4.6.4

⁶. Beebe H. "David Hume" In S. Biernecker and Pritchard (eds). *The Routledge Companion to Epistemology*. (London: Routledge, 2011), 34.

⁷. Hume. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1.1.1.1

'bundle' of perceptions. Hume states first that the self is not a perception at all, it is 'that to which our several perceptions and ideas are supposed to have a reference.' Therefore, we may reasonably conclude that it is, in fact, nothing.⁸

Equally, Hume observed that, if he can't find the self by surveying all his perceptions, offering up all of them for inspection and finding no self there, then this is sufficient proof that the self does not exist. This claim is strengthened by the fact that personal identity is not made up of one 'simple and invariable' substance. Hume's criterion of personal identity is 'the necessity of unity in that principle of which we suppose our several perceptions to be the result.'⁹ This means that personal identity is a rational belief, not an idea we get from impressions. Hume counts other philosophers as well as 'the wiser and better sort of common people' as adhering to the notion that personal identity requires us to believe that there is some kind of 'immaterial and indivisible substance' that continues in existence. Hume again attacks this idea, saying that almost everyone's opinions are descended from a 'prejudice', not any good argument. He says that instead, the imagination is led along 'a continuous succession of objects' and our natural way of thinking is almost 'opposite' to the philosophers' decree.

Consequently, Hume notes that this understanding of personal identity has a detrimental effect. By understanding the self in this continuous, individualist way, Hume believes that we, in turn, become unthinking, unemotional, and selfish.¹⁰ Hume's philosophy of the self is a direct attack on the traditional notion of the rationalists, and it is clear that this has contemporary relevance such as in the debates about posthumous harm. It is clear too that Hume's philosophy of the self marks a significant turning point in 'Western' philosophy of the mind and the self. Finally, Hume's account of the self has generated a vast amount of academic discussions and debates.¹¹ His link to empirical understandings of the world has been both criticized, expanded, and used as a springboard for many other ideas.

Criticisms against David Hume's Theory

David Hume's theory of the self seems to be persuasive in different aspects. Hume was much consistent in his theory than the other empiricists like Locke and Berkeley. However,

⁸. David Hume. *An Enquiry concerned Human Understanding*. Introduction by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12.2

⁹. Kenny A. *An Illustrated Brief History of Western Philosophy* (New York: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006), 74

¹⁰ David Hume. *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding* Introduction by Peter Millican (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 12-6

¹¹. David Hume. "The Bundle Theory of the Self" in *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, accessed June 15, 2024, <https://www.Sparksnote.com>

this does not mean his theory is devoid of criticisms, it only means that he was empirical all through in his explanation of concepts and entities. In what follows, we shall look into some of the criticisms that are posed against Hume's theory of the self.¹²

Lack of personal identity: Thomas Reid, a Scottish Philosopher and a contemporary of Hume, argued that Hume's view of the self as a bundle of perceptions fails to account for the continuity of personal identity over time. It's difficult to explain how our experiences and memories form a unified, persistent self if the self is merely a collection of distinct, fleeting impressions.

Perception vs. introspection: Hume's theory relies heavily on the idea that our perceptions are the basis of self-knowledge. However, William James asserts that introspection suggests the existence of a unified self beyond the sum of perceptions.¹³

Subject-object distinction: Some philosophers such as Immanuel Kant and G.E Moore, argue that Hume's theory doesn't adequately explain the relationship between the self (subject) and its perceptions (objects). If the self is just a bundle of perceptions, it becomes unclear how it can simultaneously be the subject experiencing those perceptions.¹⁴

Ethical implications: Hume's theory has been criticized by J.L. Mackie for undermining moral responsibility and personal accountability, as it challenges the idea of a unified, enduring self that can be held responsible for its actions over time.

Circularity: Thomas Reid argue that Hume's account of the self relies on the very notion it tries to explain. In order to observe and reflect on perceptions, there must be a self-observing entity, which Hume's theory struggles to account for.¹⁵

Despite these criticisms, Hume's theory of the self remains an influential and thought-provoking contribution to the philosophical discussion about personal identity.¹⁶

However, Hume's position on the self (personal identity) did not answer objectively the questions of what is the self? Rather he created more intellectual vagueness and

^{12.} David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*. 1.4.6.12

^{13.} W. Lawhead. "David Hume: The Scottish" in *A voyage of Discovery*, (USA: University of Mississippi, 2007), 335

^{14.} John Stuart Mill. *A System of Logic* (London: John W. Parker, 1843), 105

^{15.} B.N. Moore and K. Bruder, *Philosophy: The Power of Ideas* (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 93

^{16.} M. Brodowicz. "David Hume's Concept of the Self Essay", March 3, 2024, <https://aithor.com>

contradictions as exposed in his explanations of the terms, ideas, impressions and perception. For him, impressions are superior to ideas, impressions are more forceful and lively than ideas: for example, actual feeling of pain is more forceful and lively than merely thinking about a pain. While perception constitutes the self. For me, there are serious ontological problems posed by Hume's position on the self as bundle of perceptions because he assumes that ideas are particular not universal and if so, the self cannot be known even if it does exist. The challenge is, if we cannot know the self then, there is no personal identity and if there is no personal identity, how do we know that a particular individual is one and same person over a long period of time after substantial changes?

Consequently, in an attempt to answer the foregoing questions, I totally agree with Plato in his 'Divided Line' where he made distinctions between Universals and particular. Universals for him (Plato) are superior to particulars because universals are eternal (unchanging), while particulars are ephemeral (changing).

As such, we are able to know particulars because there exist universals that we intuitively approach: for example, individual persons (particulars) are known or approached through the lens of humanity (universals). This is why we know others are human beings like us as distinct from animals. Therefore, for me, there exist a self (particular) as inherent in the mind (universal) which can be intuitively known.

Conclusion

Hume asks us to consider what impression gives us our concept of self. We tend to think of ourselves as stable entities that exist over time. But no matter how closely we examine our own experiences, we never observe anything beyond a series of transient feelings, sensations, and impressions. We cannot observe ourselves, or what we are, in a unified way. There is no impression of the "self" that ties our particular impressions together. In other words, we can never be directly aware of ourselves, only of what we are experiencing at any given moment.

Although the relations between our ideas, feelings, and so on, may be traced through time by memory, there is no real evidence of any core that connects them. This argument also applies to the concept of the soul. Hume suggests that the self is just a bundle of perceptions, like links in a chain. To look for a unifying self beyond those perceptions is like looking for a chain apart from the links that constitute it. Hume argues that our concept of the self is a result of our natural habit of attributing unified existence to any collection of associated parts. This belief is natural, but there is no logical support for it.

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