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Hume's Recantation of His Theory of Personal Identity

DAVID PEARS

I am going to defend a diagnosis of Hume's recantation that I have already defended—rather unsuccessfully—in more than one publication.¹ My excuse for trying again is that I shall now offer a more carefully qualified defense. My diagnosis was, and still is, that in the Appendix to the *Treatise* Hume came to see that he could not account for the necessary ownership of perceptions (impressions and ideas)—i.e., for the fact that *this very perception* could not have occurred in a different set.

I will argue that Hume realized that his account of the identity of particular perceptions was defective, but that he could not see his way to putting it right. Of course, there are many ways of interpreting this diagnosis. One interpretation would be that he hadn't the faintest idea what was wrong with his account of the identity of particular perceptions and perhaps did not even realize that this was in fact the source of the weakness of his theory of personal identity. The diagnosis at the other end of the spectrum would be that he knew that he needed a theory of individual essences,, but did not know how he could formulate it.

In a case like this it is a mistake to be too precise about the contents of a baffled philosopher's mind. He can see the deficiency in his system and perhaps even the general way in which it might be made good. But the detailed structure of the remedy is not visible even on his intellectual horizon—it is, as it were, hull-down. So my diagnosis will not imply that Hume could see the specific theory that he needed—for example, Saul Kripke's theory of necessity of origin—but only that he would have been content if he could have formulated and adopted a theory

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that played a similar role.² However, any possibility of that kind was blocked by ineradicable obstacles in his system.

So in what follows I shall argue only that Hume was aware of a gap in his theory of personal identity and had a vague idea of what would fill it but nothing more than that. Any detailed account of what would fill it was beyond his ken.

There is a second introductory point that I need to make before I start the defense of my diagnosis of Hume's dissatisfaction with his own theory. Don Garrett has produced a comprehensive review of the various diagnoses of Hume's predicament that have been proposed, including mine, and has put forward a diagnosis of his own.³ But, unfortunately, I am unable to discuss all these competitors in this short paper.

My last introductory point is terminological. I need to distinguish token-based properties of perceptions from their type-based properties. For example, an impression's position in a particular sequence is a token-based property; its character—for example, its being a perception of blue—is a type-based property. The same distinction applies to ideas.

Now Hume's discussion of personal identity is primarily a discussion of the unity of a person and so, given his mentalistic approach, primarily a discussion of the unity of a mind. But it is not wrong, but at most only a wrong emphasis, to read it as a discussion of the reidentification of persons after a lapse of time. For the considerations that settle the question of unity or multiplicity will also settle the question of identity or diversity. Of course, the two questions will be phrased differently to reflect the different situations in which they arise. The first question would usually be raised in a mental hospital, while the second one would more often be heard in a police station or a law court. But the material needed in order to answer them would be the same.

Whichever question we consider, the distinction between token-based properties of perceptions (in Hume's use of the term) and their type-based properties is obviously going to be important. One way to appreciate its importance is to reflect on the numerous cases in which what leads us to ascribe two perceptions to the same person has nothing to do with their type-based properties and everything to do with their token-based properties. For example, in day-dreaming or in the psychotic fugues of a disordered mind the mere occurrence of a string of perceptions in one's own consciousness, or their occurrence, as reported by another person, in his consciousness, is enough to establish their ownership without any reference to their type-based properties. What is indicated directly by type-based properties is coherence or rationality and that is a clue to mental unity or diversity, but the direct criterion of mental unity or identity must rely on token-based properties.

Some commentators on Hume's system draw attention to this important fact by suggesting that he ought to have added a further relation to his list of

identity-supporting relations between perceptions. The relations on his list are resemblance, causation, and contiguity in time, and the suggestion is that he ought to have added the relation, "co-experienced." This is an understandable attempt to give token-based properties of perceptions their due. For it allows us to ascribe two perceptions to the same person on purely token-based grounds. It is enough that they occur simultaneously or, without any interval, successively, in the same sequence of perceptions, and their type-based properties are irrelevant. However, the suggestion does not go far enough. For the word "co-experienced" might imply that the simultaneity of the two perceptions, or the immediate sequentiality of the later one, are themselves experienced, and, though this is often true, it draws attention away from the more important fact that, whether the person is aware or unaware that the two perceptions are linked in these ways, they actually are linked in these ways. This fact simply depends on the order of their occurrence in the mental sequence and, presumably, in the underlying physical sequence, and so depends entirely on their token-based properties.

My question now is, "Why did Hume come to think that the connections between perceptions that he specifies in the *Treatise* are insufficient to serve as the foundations of personal identity and personal unity?" I will now go back to his own description of the shortfall of his earlier account. He specifies it as a failure to find sufficiently strong connections between the successive perceptions of a single person. That is the clear and unmistakable implication of his statement that he deficiency would be made good if he could find a real connection between the successive perceptions of a single person, or, alternatively, if he could admit that they were perceptions inhering in an individual substance. But unfortunately he could not accept either of these two solutions and he does now see what to put in their place. He says that he does not see how to remove the inconsistency between his two principles, that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences and that the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences. Since these two principles are not inconsistent with one another, he must mean that their conjunction is inconsistent with the phenomenon of personal identity. The question is, with what aspect of the phenomenon?

This formulation of Hume's quandary in the Appendix to the *Treatise* is far more revealing than most commentators admit. For it makes clear that the fault of his earlier account was that it did less than justice to the cohesion between the elements that constitute a single person (and, by implication, to the lack of cohesion between the elements that constitute any two different persons). The trouble, he implies, is not that perceptions are the wrong kind of element, but that their associations are governed by laws that do not provide a convincing explanation of the phenomenon of personal identity (or of the diversity of two different persons). Contrary to his claim in the body of the *Treatise*, the laws governing the association of ideas are not as successful in explaining the unity of a single person

(or the diversity of different persons) as Newton's laws of gravitation had been in explaining the disposition and movements of stars in space observed by astronomers. Hume is complaining that there is something wrong with the cement rather than something wrong with the bricks.

That is one clear implication of his recantation in the Appendix. It also has another implication which is less clear and, perhaps, ought to be called a "suggestion." His specifications of the two unacceptable ways of improving his theory of personal identity both involve revisions of the fundamental principles of his system. This suggests that his problem is global. In fact, in the Appendix he writes like a philosopher who has followed his basic principles consistently only to find that in the end, instead of recommending a theory, he has reduced it to absurdity. In such cases it is notoriously difficult to know how far back to go before starting again.

Let us look at the theory of personal identity developed in the body of the *Treatise* and try to find an answer to this question: "How much demolition did Hume think was needed before rebuilding could start?"

His theory in the body of the *Treatise* is that the perceptions of a single person are connected by three relations, resemblance, causation, and contiguity in time. But what about contiguity in space, which he normally takes to be a necessary component of causation? His answer is that contiguity in space has a role to play among perceptions that is less important than the role that it plays among physical objects. This is a disingenuous understatement of the total irrelevance of contiguity in space within the mind, and it is a good point at which to apply pressure to his theory of personal identity.

The critical question that he ought to be able to answer is this: "Is the contiguity in space that he has in mind a token-based or type-based property of perceptions?" If he says that it is type-based, he will be restricting the operation of causation among perceptions to cases in which they have a spatial character or content, but that would be an unacceptable restriction on the causation of ideas by association. For it is evident that perceptions can be associated even if they have no spatial content. If, on the other hand, he says that the contiguity in space is a token-based property of perceptions that are causally related, he will face the even more obvious objection that the mind is not a spatial theatre. This is a tough dilemma and it is disingenuous to say that the role of contiguity in space is less important within the mind.

What Hume needed at this point was a substitute for the spatial contiguity that underpins physical causation. His need can be dramatized by asking for the difference between a train of thought followed within a single mind and a train of thought begun in one mind and transferred telepathically to another mind before its completion. We do not have to believe that telepathy ever occurs when we ask this question. The point is only that, if we followed Hume's suggestion, that a direct

causal link between two perceptions conclusively establishes that they belong to the same mind, we would have to sharpen this criterion of identity of mind by finding some substitute for spatial contiguity in the mind. We could not simply drop spatial contiguity and, without finding any substitute for it, still expect that we would reach the answer that we now reach to the question, "How many minds would be involved in a case of telepathy?"

However, Hume does not even look for a substitute for spatial contiguity. He merely says that spatial contiguity has no great importance in cases of mental causation. This might have been more persuasive if he could have identified a substitute for it. So his failure to find, or even look for, a substitute for it may provide a point of entry into the reasoning behind his recantation in the Appendix and help us to understand it.

Let us follow this clue and ask what plausible substitute might be found to take over the role of spatial contiguity within the mind. The obvious candidate is occurrence in a mind that is associated with a particular body. However, Hume cannot accept this candidate because his system is Cartesian: he starts with purely mental data and has to climb out into the physical world without making any independent assumptions about it. If he had to admit that identity of mind depended in any way on identity of body, he would be abandoning the enterprise. That is why in the Appendix he presents the fault in his theory of personal identity as something that he finds himself unable to correct. The only way to put it right would be to retrace his steps and to rethink the basic principles of his system.

One way to appreciate why he found the fault so devastating is to go back to his optimistic account of his enterprise at the beginning of the *Treatise*. He saw himself as the Newton of the mental world, and he was going to demonstrate that the laws governing the association of ideas were the counterpart of Newton's laws governing the movement of physical objects in space. So far, so good. But he went wrong when he tried to demonstrate that his laws were the *independent* counterpart of Newton's laws. His error lay in his attempt to model the identity-line of a perception on the identity-line of a physical object in space. This mistake had two aspects. First, a physical object, such as an asteroid, might have belonged to a different constellation from the one to which it actually belongs. Second, it might move from its present position to a different position in space. But neither of these two vicissitudes is logically possible for a perception identified as a token. So Hume says that he has loosened the connections between the perceptions of a single person excessively and that he does not know how to tighten them again using the resources available in his system. Causal necessity, analyzed in his way, was an obviously insufficient resource, and, though logical necessity would be sufficiently strong, he did not see how to bring it to bear on this problem.

This diagnosis—to repeat a point made earlier—does not imply that Hume knew how to correct the mistake in his theory of personal identity. He did not know, and he admits that he did not know, how to correct it. It is true that Kripke's theory of necessity of origin would have helped him to correct his mistake and even a less elaborate theory of individual essences would have been some help. But that only indicates his need, as we can now see it, and the clarity of his view of it fell somewhere far short of the clarity of our view of it.

I will now shift this investigation to two related objections to my interpretation of his recantation, and that will give me an opportunity to say something more about the general nature of the problem.

The first objection, which I have heard made in discussion more than once, is that Hume seems to be perfectly happy to admit that a perception may exist nowhere and in complete isolation from any other perceptions, and even says that perceptions play the role of substances in his system. The answer to this objection is obvious: he says these things in the main body of the *Treatise* and criticizes them in the Appendix.

Don Garrett rejects my interpretation for a reason which is superficially similar but in fact much stronger.⁴ Even in the Appendix Hume gives no hint of any anxieties or doubts about the identities of particular perceptions. So that cannot have been the unsolved problem that was worrying him. If that had been the problem that led him to recant, it would have forced him to rethink his theory of belief in the physical world, but there is no hint of any anxiety about that theory in the Appendix.

This objection has the force that the previous one lacked. For, first, it is based on a feature of the Appendix and not on a feature of the main text of the *Treatise*; and, second, it specifies other doctrines in the *Treatise* that would be radically affected by any revision of the account he had given of the identity of particular perceptions, and yet nothing is said in the Appendix about the need to revise these doctrines.

This is a complex and powerful objection and the only way to answer it is to take a more global view of Hume's predicament, which I now proceed to do.

I will start by rehearsing a puzzling feature of Hume's recantation—a feature that I have already mentioned but not sufficiently emphasized. Why does he say that his problem would be solved if he could find a stronger link between the perceptions of a single person? Many of my perceptions follow one another without being connected by any type-based representational link. For example, I am thinking about this problem and I look out of the window and see that it is raining, or I remember a holiday in Italy. Or I am simply day-dreaming. Why should I search for any kind of necessary connection between these perceptions? There does not seem to be any work for necessity to do in such a case—unless it is the necessity derived from the token-based properties of my perceptions, which

will block my sharing of the next one with anyone else, and block its earlier transference to anyone else. That, of course, is one of the main arguments for my diagnosis.

But Don Garrett's objection is that, if Hume had really seen, or even only half-seen, the reason why he needed a stronger necessity connecting the perceptions of a single person, he would have realized that his account of the continued and distinct existence of physical objects needed revision. But in the Appendix, he shows no anxiety about that account.

Part of the answer to this objection is that Hume's philosophy of mind was unquestioningly Cartesian. His starting-point was what he found when he looked into his own mind, and he simply assumed that other people's findings would be the same. So he under-rated the importance of his own location in space as an embodied observer, and with even-handed impartiality, he under-rated the importance of the physical location of other observers in space. He was not even very interested in the physiological basis of his own sequences of perceptions. Their precise nature was a matter to be investigated by neurologists or—to put it less anachronistically—by experts in the movements of animal spirits. More dangerously, he was not even very interested in the token-based properties of his own perceptions. Consequently, the neo-Kantian systems of recent years—for example, the systems of P. F. Strawson or Gareth Evans—were simply beyond his ken. They were unthinkable before Kant's revolutionary construal of the unsolved problem of the "external world." To describe the limitations of his philosophical landscape in Newtonian terms, he was like an astronomer who regarded stars as visible patterns on the two-dimensional fabric of the sky, with no possibility of habitation, and so no possibility of reciprocal observation.

So my answer to Don Garrett's objection to my interpretation of Hume's recantation in the Appendix is that Hume realized that his problem was global and could only be solved by a radical reconstruction of his philosophy; but he did not see how to reconstruct it, because he did not see which parts of it would need remedial treatment and which parts would have to be amputated.

NOTES

1 See the chapter "Hume on Personal Identity" in my *Questions in the Philosophy of Mind* (London: Duckworth, 1975) and my *Hume's System: An Examination of the First Book of His Treatise* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), chapter 9, as well as "Hume on Personal Identity," in *Hume Studies* 19 (1993): 289-99.

2 That is, any theory of individual essences.

3 Don Garrett, *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 163-85.

4 *Ibid.*, 173-4.