

Hume on the Self

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Abstract In the *Treatise* Hume argues that a person is “nothing but a bundle of perceptions”. But what precisely is the meaning of this bundle thesis of a person? In my paper, an attempt is made to articulate two plausible interpretations of this controversial view and to identify and evaluate a number of problems for this thesis central that is central to Hume’s account of the self.

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When Hume prepares the way for his *Treatise* account of the self in the section “Of personal identity”, he dispatches a rival view as manifestly contradictory and absurd. His concise and bleak assessment of this alternative account of the self is due, in large measure, to the conceptual scheme that Hume adopts early on in the *Treatise* in his attempt to broaden and strengthen the science of human nature. His decision in the very first section of the *Treatise* to introduce and promote the novel linguistic framework that is founded on the notion of impressions enables Hume to detect fundamental flaws in the views of other philosophers that they, apparently, are unable to identify. Equally important, Hume’s conceptual scheme provides him with a new conception of the self that from his point of view, appears to be robust and immune from the challenges that beset the view of the mind that is promoted by his most prominent rivals. So what is this view of the self that Hume enthusiastically introduces in the *Treatise*? And is this theory, even with its commitment to the celebrated impressions, any less defective than that defended by his rivals? This paper is an attempt to throw light on both of these important issues. Take the first question.

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Hume’s conception of the self is articulated most fully and directly in Section 6 of the *Treatise*, in the section titled “Of personal identity.” While there are faint vestiges of this conception elsewhere in the *Treatise*, most notably in his analysis in “Of the

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immateriality of the soul”, it is Section 6 that contains the most complete expression of Hume’s own view of the self. Not one to mince his words, Hume cuts to the chase with a concise proposition: the self is a collection of perceptions. As he bluntly puts it, we are “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions.” (*Treatise* 252). On the surface, this seems a straightforward statement: it appears to be precise and readily verifiable. Unlike his rivals with their opaque view that the self is an unchanging mysterious substance, when Hume maintains that we are constituted by a set of changing perceptions, he is adopting a view of a person that appears to be easier to test than that advocated by his rivals. For are these immediate and directly accessible perceptions not more accessible than the alleged fictions proposed by his rivals? And as perceptions, are nothing more than distinct and separable sensory impressions, as far as Hume is concerned, questions on the nature of the self now become distinctly decidable: confine the investigation to the directly accessible impressions generated by the senses. So, if we view the self as nothing more than a concatenation of diverse sensory impressions, each one of which is reputed to be directly and unambiguously accessible—even though the set or collection of impressions is (allegedly) constantly in flux—reliable knowledge of the self now becomes attainable. And this, to a large extent is surely what the founders of the new science of human nature are after. But is this inroad into the citadel of a human being as reliable as Hume intimates it is?

Is Hume’s enthusiasm for his view of the self warranted? Hume has provided us with his reasons for adopting this view on the self, due in large measure, to his rejection of his rivals’ view of the self, with its commitment to mysterious immaterial substances. But is Hume’s bundle thesis on the self, as it stands, true? More fundamentally, what does it mean? Even if the thesis is true, the suggestion that a complex person, who is capable of engaging in a diverse series of acts, such as falling in love, becoming angry, being thoughtful, and of being self-conscious—to randomly mention but a few activities that a person can perform—can be reduced to something that is nothing more than a collection of discrete perceptions seems implausible, if not far-fetched. This minimalist view of a person on the surface seems implausible, and certainly does not appear to make sense. It certainly does not appear to do justice to the myriad aspects of a person. Hume’s austere thesis on the self on the surface appears similar to the suggestion that DaVinci’s *Mona Lisa* in the Louvre is nothing more than blobs of pigment on a canvas. This bold thesis on a person, as succinct as it is, gives rise to a number of important questions that ought to be considered before any decision can be made on its viability. These are not straightforward questions to deal with, as becomes apparent from even a cursory investigation of the theory and its ramifications. We shall discover that Hume has unfortunately not helped us, or himself, on these matters. For a careful investigation of his bundle thesis of the self and its implications begs many questions that do not appear to be anticipated in the *Treatise*. Neither the main text nor Hume’s critical appendix to the *Treatise*, in spite of its forthrightness, says anything about these issues. His silence on these important matters is most unfortunate, as I shall demonstrate below, as the lacunae seriously compromise his view on the self. This suggests—or so I shall argue—contrary to Hume’s assessment, that *both* the rival substance theory of the self and Hume’s bundle theory of the self are beset with difficulties, some serious. While Hume might have identified some possible shortcomings in the substance theory of the self, his

own account appears to have its own set of problems. All of which begs the important question on which theory has the least shortcomings. Naturally, we can begin to consider this question only after we have determined the standing of Hume's own view on the self. For these reasons in this paper I shall restrict my exploration of Hume's bundle theory on the self and its potential problems and leave it to others to weigh his innovative view against the more traditional substance theory of the self. So what appears to be problematic with the thesis that a person is "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions"?

The view of the self that Hume vigorously promotes in the *Treatise* is not as straightforward as its author intimates it is. While his analysis in "Of personal identity" leaves one with the distinct impression that Hume is convinced that he has found the truth where the self is concerned, the confident tone of his proclamations belies many troubling issues. Unfortunately, none of these potentially fatal concerns are even mentioned, let alone dealt with by the intrepid Scotsman.¹ What might they be? A few of these questions emerge if we expand on and make more explicit some of the strands of Hume's central thesis statement. My modest modification here to his initial terse expression of the bundle theory of the self, while still true to the essentials of his position, makes some of the problematic aspects of his thesis more apparent:

Statement One: A person is a bundle of perceptions and nothing else.

How ought we to understand this statement? While the reasons for this thesis might initially appear plausible, encouraging Hume to explore the motivation of philosophers for adopting their (discredited) rival substantial theory of the self, at the end of the section "Of personal identity" we are still left wondering how he wants us to read his thesis that is the cornerstone of his analysis of the newly emerging philosophical conception of the self. In the first place, questions arise on the *logic* of the statement. Is it correct to view Statement One as a *categorical* statement, without any qualifying clauses? The uncompromising declarative sentences that Hume relies on to express his thoughts on the self in the main text of the *Treatise*, along with the confident, if not brash tone of the writing in the early part of the section "Of personal identity" certainly leaves one with the impression that this is his intent. A person definitely is, in Hume's considered view, a set of perceptions. Period. There are no exceptions or mitigating qualifications to this provocative statement. We either take it or leave it at that: as Hume sees it, we need not concern ourselves with any potentially compromising reservations where his thesis on the self is concerned. As he does not hedge his statement with any qualifying clauses it seems plausible to assume that the statement on his own view on the self ought to be viewed as a categorical statement, free of any encumbering mitigating conditions. However, there is another, more nuanced way to read his thesis.

¹ One might object that trailblazers are most unlikely to draw attention to problems associated with their innovative ideas. This rejoinder strikes me as moot when one takes into account the scathing criticisms leveled by Hume against his rivals. As a philosopher more than willing to wield a critical ax against his intellectual opposition, Hume is obliged to acknowledge potential shortcomings in his own views: something he does not do in the section "Of personal identity." And when he does come clean in the appendix and acknowledge that there are problems with his account of the self, the problems that he identifies there do not concern the status of his theory on the self but concern its justification.

The uncompromising, authoritative tone of the language Hume draws on to articulate his thesis notwithstanding, it can be shown that a more appropriate interpretation of Hume's articulation of his bundle thesis of the self is to regard his statement as a *tentative* expression of his thoughts. On this reading, the statement is little more than a hypothesis, subject to the standard vicissitudes of experience. While perhaps not commanding the same level of attention that the thesis could engender if read categorically, this interpretation of the expression of the bundle theory of the self still warrants the serious scrutiny of individuals interested in knowing what a person is. Naturally, Hume's statement on the self on this softer interpretation must still be regarded as an earnest contribution to the science of human nature, fully entitled to systematic consideration by both philosophers and the vulgar. But the assertive and confident aura that initially accompanied Hume's terse statement on the self, on this alternative interpretation, is now more restrained and cautious.

While Hume, unfortunately, does not provide us with any direct textual assistance on this important matter of interpretation, a case can be made that the second option is the more plausible of the two options that I have identified here. The suggestion that we ought to view Statement One hypothetically is consistent with the observation that the analysis in the section "Of personal identity" makes much of *evidence*. Sensory evidence, apparently constitutes the Achilles heel of Hume's rivals' substance theory of the self, as far as he is concerned, enabling him to detect the contradictions and absurdities in their position. And it is evidence from the senses that Hume draws on in order to provide the support that he needs for his own thesis. Immediately after presenting his provocative bundle thesis on the self he alludes to the observable facts that he views as providing the necessary support for his philosophical thesis on the self:

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. (*Treatise* 252–3)

This is an important component of Hume's strategy in his analysis of the problems concerning the self. As he intimates, his statement on the self is not a casual suggestion, but a serious proposal motivated by a consideration of various observable facts and most importantly, constrained by these facts. Furthermore, the thesis does not depend on the existence of mysterious fictions, as does the discredited substance theory of his rivals. Instead, the bundle thesis on the self requires down-to-earth sensory evidence for its verification: namely, eminently accessible perceptions that we are all presumed to possess. Furthermore, in his view, not only is there evidence for his thesis, there is a lot of it. As it happens there is a great deal of the required evidence that is supportive of his innovative view on the self. Each one of us possesses this evidence in abundance, namely in the form of our perceptions. Finally, this evidence comes from a dependable source, namely the senses. As Hume intimates, this abundant evidence available to all of us proves that his bundle thesis on the self is true. All of which suggests, as I see it, that Hume regards his bundle thesis on the self, not as a categorical statement free of qualifications, but as a plausible, scientific hypothesis beholden to the world of voluminous diverse sensory evidence. Unfortunately, this interpretation, if correct, gives rise to additional difficult questions, none of which have been anticipated, let alone dealt with by Hume.

I have argued that the interpretation of Hume's bundle thesis on the self as a scientific hypothesis is plausible. If correct, this reading gives rise to a number of challenging problems for Hume. Here are a few of the more pressing issues calling for further attention if my proposal holds any water. To make matters manageable I shall first list the issues that strike me as most pressing and then consider each separately. Five issues stand out:

1. Biased assessment of the evidence: Hume appears to be very selective in what he accepts as evidence for his thesis. He fails to consider evidence that could falsify his thesis on the self.
2. Fallacious generalization from the evidence: his personal experiences serve as the basis of his generalization for all mankind, with the exception of those allegedly misguided metaphysicians who endorse the rival substance theory of the self.
3. Contradictory evidence: when Hume gathers evidence to support his view, his net ensnares material that appears to both confirm and (unbeknownst to him) refute his thesis.
4. Unintelligible evidence: the conception of the evidence that Hume alludes to appears to be difficult if not impossible to comprehend.
5. Unnecessary evidence: the search for evidence for his view on the self can be shown to be moot.

Consider the first suggestion from the list above that Hume is selective in the evidence that he gathers.

As we have seen, when Hume presents his bundle thesis on the self, he delights in pointing to the evidence that he has found to support his view. From his perspective, this evidence is incontrovertible. In many respects, Hume seems to be correct on this score. There can be no doubt that the mind has numerous, different perceptions that are in constant flux:

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. (*Treatise* 253)

But appeals to evidence—as with Hume's references here to his changing perceptions—in support of any thesis cannot establish beyond a doubt that that proposition is certain and absolutely true: at best, the thesis can be regarded as probably true, perhaps even as highly probable. And inductive probable propositions, even those with high degrees of probability, are nothing more than tentative hypotheses manifesting a preponderance one way or another to some truth value. That is to say, these hypothetical propositions are conjectures that require their advocates to weigh the evidence either for or against their position. The evidence needs to be carefully assayed in an attempt to either confirm or refute the hypothesis. Now, it would be naïve to assume that if a thesis can be viewed as a true hypothesis by virtue of the fact that there is some evidence in its favor, there cannot simultaneously be contrary evidence that, under the appropriate circumstances, could undermine the thesis—thereby serving as a potential, if not actual, refutation of the thesis. It is thus unrealistic to take it for granted that all of the evidence that can be gathered that pertains to a thesis will automatically serve to confirm it. Surely some of the evidence that can be accumulated by a conscientious objective investigator is not likely to

support the thesis. *But Hume does not even entertain the possibility that his bundle thesis on the self is false.* As far as he is concerned, it is a true thesis that has the edge over his rivals in that it at least is supported by independent evidence. But what reasons do we have from Hume for thinking that there is no negative evidence, i.e., evidence that is incompatible with his view on the self? Surely there is *some* evidence that can refute his bundle thesis of the self? Unfortunately, he does not provide any reasons for assuming that his thesis can only be true. Without some discussion from him on this important issue we are left with the distinct impression that Hume is not willing to concede that he is wrong about the self. And when we factor in what appears to be an arrogant tone to the articulation of his view on the self, we are tempted to wonder whether Hume's uncompromising theory of the self is little better than the outburst of some radical irrational thinker wildly speculating on the nature of a person. So Hume's reliance on highly selective evidence in support of his theory of the self, while commendatory to some extent, can be seen as indicative of a biased mind.²

Unfortunately, even the evidence that Hume presents in *favor* of his bundle thesis on the self appears to be less than satisfactory. Some of it actually threatens to undermine his position. As I shall demonstrate shortly, the evidence that Hume provides us for his theory on the self can be viewed as a refutation of his view on the self. Before we explore this issue on the potentially compromising nature of the evidence that Hume has gathered, there are two other aspects of his reliance on evidence that call for attention: the one more pressing than the other. Take the less problematic issue. The evidence garnered by Hume is insufficient to establish his thesis.

To put it politely, the sensory evidence that Hume has gathered in the *Treatise* for his bundle thesis on the self is somewhat limited: a limitation that gives rise to a number of interesting problems. The evidence that Hume collects happens to be culled from his own private world, i.e., he is drawing on the operations of his own mind and body to formulate and confirm a thesis on the self that he clearly intends to extrapolate beyond himself. Without direct access to the minds of others, with their inaccessible perceptions, the best that Hume can do under the circumstances is draw on his own experiences. Operating on the unexamined assumption that *his* private world of perceptions is fundamentally similar to that of *everyone else*—while simultaneously assuming that he is not the sole constituent of some solipsistic world—and assuming that these perceptions are produced by organs that operate in basically similar ways between individuals, Hume takes it for granted that what applies to him applies to the rest of mankind. For instance, Hume makes explicit reference to eyes that produce perceptions that possess definite, yet fundamentally similar, characteristics. But are our sense organs alike, operating in similar ways, producing similar perceptions? Some studies suggest not. Numerous studies have shown that perceptions are not similarly produced. For example, individuals who suffer from synesthesia perceive colors where others perceive mere letters and numerals. The contents

² Hume appears to subscribe to a naïve view of science, according to which scientists need merely look for evidence that *confirms* their theories. Many critics of this model of science, most notably Karl Popper, point out that the failure to actively seek refutation instances to test one's theory encourages the researcher to become highly selective in determining the status of the theory at hand. (See Popper, "Conjectures and Refutations" on this issue.)

of our perceptual worlds can be very different, as can the processes that give rise to the contents of these worlds. There is great variety where the nature and production of our perceptions are concerned. So the attempt to inductively generalize from one mental world and its contents to other mental worlds is fraught with difficulties. What Hume says about his world of changing perceptions might not be representative of the perceptual worlds of others. Yet he trades on the unexamined assumption that these perceptual worlds are fundamentally similar. Hence his remark that “*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.*” (*Treatise* 252, my emphasis). But what warrant has Hume to assume that his mind is similar to that of the rest of mankind? He clearly needs to *argue* for this pillar of his analysis and not merely accept it as problem-free. Without the necessary ancillary premise/s to support his generalization, the limited evidence that Hume has gathered from his own personal world proves to be insufficient to support his universal bundle thesis of the self.

The limited evidence that Hume provides for his thesis on the self faces yet another problem. It does not appear to be internally consistent. In his enthusiastic presentation of his provocative account of the self, Hume inadvertently provides us with conflicting evidence. While some of the evidence that he provides in the section “Of personal identity” appears to *confirm* his bundle thesis on the self, unfortunately there is also evidence in this section that appears to *undermine* this very thesis, in that it seems not to be entirely compatible with, if not contradictory to his views on perceptions and the self. Let me explain.

As we have seen, Hume makes much of the sensory evidence available to him in his analysis. Not only does he use this sensory evidence *against* his rivals with their substance theory of the self, he depends on it to *support* his own bundle thesis on the self. As he sees it, we all live in discrete perceptual worlds whose content is constantly changing. But where do our forever fluctuating perceptions come from? Hume does not hesitate to inform us: from our *eyes*. In the midst of his references to his ephemeral perceptions, he quite openly refers to *body* parts—eyes, and their sockets. And these body parts are presumably more stable—that is to say, less transitory—than the constantly changing perceptions. For immediately after boldly informing us that the bulk of “mankind...are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions”, Hume informs us about the origin of these perceptions: “Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions.” (*Treatise* 252). Thanks to (physical) eyes that are relatively unchanging in (physical) eye-sockets that are similarly stable, streams of different perceptions can be generated. But are these similar types of entities? The textual evidence from the *Treatise* suggests that Hume regards perceptions and parts of the body as fundamentally *different* types of entities: well at least as far as his explicit proposals in the section “Of personal identity” goes. But if Hume is willing to acknowledge the existence of two mutually exclusive types of entities where persons are concerned, and quite prepared to refer to both sets of (different types) of entities without any reservations, a fundamental question arises: why single out the one set of entities over the other in determining the ontological scheme that best applies to persons? In short, why identify a person with a set of (non-physical) perceptions, when physical entities apparently are equally accessible? Rather than, for instance, rely on a collection of physical objects to serve as the

referents for the definiens, Hume focuses exclusively on perceptions. Why? Let us
 take a closer look at his characterization of perceptions and entities from alternative
 ontological schemes in the section “Of personal identity” in an attempt to understand
 a possible justification for Hume’s preference for perceptions where the explication of
 a person is concerned. My hope is that an attempt at reconstructing a clear under-
 standing of his conception of the relationship between perceptions and these alterna-
 tive entities will enable us to appreciate the likely grounds for his preference for
 perceptions when defining a person.³

With his bundle thesis on the self, Hume is clearly exhibiting an explicit commit-
 ment to the ontology of perceptions at the expense of other all other ontologies. For
 instance, his bundle thesis on the self that is centered exclusively on perceptions
 implicitly excludes any commitment to the radically different ontologies of physical
 objects and minds. Nevertheless, Hume is more than willing to make reference to the
 entities from these alternative ontologies. In the section “Of personal identity”,
 numerous unrestrained references are made to entities from ontologies that exclude
 perceptions. No mention is made of any problems with the references to the denizens
 of these alternative ontologies. And as we might expect, none of the problems raised
 by these alternative ontologies are even hinted at, let alone explored by Hume. As a
 matter of fact, he not only draws on these alternative ontologies when promoting his
 bundle thesis on the self, he subsequently proceeds to rely heavily on these different
 ontological schemes in his explication of the notion of identity.⁴ But the various
 ontological schemes that Hume is drawing on in his analysis of the self are not
 entirely compatible. A case can be made that they are actually mutually exclusive. So
 the *evidence* that Hume calls on in support of his bundle thesis on the self can be
 viewed as incompatible, if not contradictory. This is a potential problem for Hume
 that if not resolved can seriously weaken, if not undermine his philosophical view that
 a person is nothing but a bundle of perceptions.

To understand Hume’s preference for the ontological scheme founded on percep-
 tions we need to have a reasonably clear grasp of his view on perceptions. While
 much of the *Treatise* is devoted to an analysis of perceptions, there are a number of
 useful remarks on perceptions in his arguments on the self that prove helpful here. A
 revealing and invaluable insight into Hume’s view on the nature of perceptions and
 his commitment to the ontology of perceptions where attempts to construct a viable
 theory of the self are concerned can be gleaned from an investigation of the theater
 analogy that he uses to explain the operation and nature of the self. We need to take a
 closer look at this famous analogy from the *Treatise* as it contains the key to many of
 the questions that have been raised above. As I shall attempt to demonstrate an
 analysis of this analogy will help us to better appreciate Hume’s argument for his
 view of the self, and most importantly here, can assist us in our attempt to resolve
 what appears to be a problem with the incompatibility of the evidence for Hume’s
 provocative thesis on the self.

³ Is this the justification that Hume would use had he to explore this issue explicitly? It is difficult to say with any precision how Hume would respond to the problems that I am alluding to here. For this reason it is prudent to couch the suggestions here as speculative proposals.

⁴ Might this be a case of Hume wanting his cake and eating it at the same time? The analysis that follows will hopefully throw a little light on this issue.

When Hume outlines his provocative bundle thesis on the self, he draws on a simile to help illustrate his views. This is the comparison of the mind with a theater:

The mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. (*Treatise* 253)

The evocative perspective introduced into the analysis with this analogy serves a useful purpose for Hume, assisting him in his attempt to drive home both the extent of the dynamism of the mind and our inability to comprehend it. However, as with all analogies, the comparison of the mind to a theater carries with it various restrictions that Hume is adamant that we acknowledge and enforce. The reservations that Hume articulates with respect to his analogy are most revealing in that they provide us with an invaluable insight into the reasons for his preference for perceptions when attempting to construct a theory of the self. With a clearer understanding of his views on the virtues of perceptions, we will be able to better appreciate his insistence on the priority of perceptions in his search for a viable theory of the self. I believe that this will have the added benefit of putting us in the position to resolve the potentially fatal problem of the incompatibility of Hume's evidence for his bundle thesis on the self.

As useful as the theater analogy might be, Hume urges us not to read too much into it. In particular, we are strongly advised not to assume that the mind is governed by the same constraints that apply to other entities:

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 compos'd. (*Treatise* 253)

Unlike other entities, such as physical objects that presumably *can* be located spatially, perceptions are paradoxically beset with a serious shortcoming: in Hume's view it is not possible to determine their location. As useful as perceptions might be for the investigator who is attempting to construct a viable account of the self, the *arena* in which these perceptions are presumably located proves difficult if not impossible to unearth and explore. What accounts for this difficulty, one might wonder? As Hume sees it, the locale for the perceptions is impossible to comprehend. But this shortcoming is not fatal in his view, compelling us to fundamentally modify our understanding of the mind. No. More specifically, we need not eliminate our assumption that there is a location for the vital perceptions that allegedly constitute us. Nor are we required to go further and possibly give up any reliance on perceptions. These would be two (unnecessarily) extreme responses to the realization that the location of our perceptions is unknowable. For the failure on our part to *understand* where the perceptions are, as he sees it, does not entail that the perceptions are not located somewhere. Perceptions apparently *do* have a location, intimates Hume and this location *is* composed of something or other: the problem is that both the location and its nature are shrouded in mystery. The location and nature of the mind or self that contains our perceptions for Hume just happens to lie beyond our intellectual grasp: "nor have we the most distant notion of *the place*, where these scenes are represented, or of *the materials*, of which it is compos'd." (*Treatise* 253, my emphasis). So we have perceptions—actually, many of them, according to

Hume—and they presumably do exist in a location (i.e., the self), but apparently we are unable to conceive of this location and equally lack the means to understand what the location might be like.

This is puzzling. Surely Hume does not want to expose himself to the charge that his account of the self is founded on an unintelligible, if not contradictory foundation? With its commitment to intelligible perceptions that allegedly are confined to an unintelligible realm it certainly begins to look as though the foundation of his bundle thesis on the self is fatally flawed. For the conception of evidence that Hume alludes to in support of his bundle thesis on the self appears to be difficult, if not impossible to comprehend. On the one hand, Hume wants us to accept that there can be little doubt that perceptions as a matter of fact do exist. Furthermore, we are apparently able to distinguish between these existing entities—that is to say, we are able to determine the nature of each of the separate perceptions and to compare them with their neighbors. So perceptions are thought to be comprehensible. But on the other hand, for some reason that is unfortunately unexplained by Hume, we are warned that we are unable to determine the location, let alone the nature of the location in which these perceptions exist. This inability is not a mere minor inconvenience, as Hume sees it, but a fundamental shortcoming, due in large part, or so it seems, to failings on our part. Our conceptual apparatus, or so it seems, is reputedly ill-equipped to unfathom the location and nature of the venue in which our accessible perceptions interact. So our *intelligible* perceptions are reputedly located in an *unintelligible* self. What accounts for this discrepancy?

While the text is unfortunately not explicit on this important point, it seems reasonable to conclude that for Hume we are faced with an insurmountable hurdle when we attempt to explore the location of our allegedly comprehensible perceptions: we cannot even conceive of their location. For we do not understand what the mind is and are equally ignorant of its constitution. Both of these issues lie beyond our comprehension. As Hume (reluctantly?) puts it, while we are intimately aware of the great variety of activities engaged in by our perceptions, and can study these perceptions closely and monitor their activity, we unfortunately do not possess even “*the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented...*” (*Treatise* 253, my emphasis). In short, as we do not possess the requisite *idea* of the mind we are unable to determine either the location of the diverse perceptual activity we are well aware of or the nature of this location.⁵ But with perceptions this is not the case.

As Hume sees it, perceptions serve as the paragon entities where comprehensibility is concerned. They are immanently accessible, distinguishable, and scrutable. These prove to be highly desirable properties. By virtue of these features of perceptions investigators interested in constructing a useful and accurate conception of a person can precisely determine the constitution of the bundles of perceptions that characterize our experiences. This invaluable insight into our perceptions has additional benefits. In the first place, access to the scrutable perceptions enables the investigator to determine with precision that the bundles of perceptions *change*, i.e., the composition of the collection of perceptions alters. In the second place, the

⁵ From this, it follows that our willingness to *talk* about the mind and its nature belies a fundamental problem that we ought to acknowledge—in this instance, that we literally do not know what we are attempting to talk about.

rate of change can be determined in broad terms. Thirdly, the *frequency* of the change 438
can be monitored. It is because perceptions are so accessible and distinguishable that 439
we apparently are able to determine that our perceptions exist as bundles “of different 440
perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a 441
perpetual flux and movement.” (*Treatise* 252) 442

Consider this example that I think illustrates Hume’s view on the three attributes of 443
perceptions that strike him as especially appealing. This example also brings home 444
the incongruous nature of his views on the distinction between the self and its 445
perceptions. When our clothes are washed—whether by us or someone else—we 446
can determine what is in the machine and how the machine has been operated. Our 447
knowledge of the contents of the machine and of its operation is fairly substantial. In 448
the first place, we can determine the composition of the bundles of washing that have 449
been placed in the washing machine: for instance, we can determine whether or not 450
the delicate fabrics have been placed together, while hardier outfits have been inserted 451
separately. Secondly, the rate of washing of the various batches can be monitored 452
accurately: for instance, we can tell how long the whites have been in the wash as 453
opposed to the time taken to wash our athletic outfits. Finally, it is possible to monitor 454
the frequency of washing of the clothes: perhaps this week we wash each day for an 455
hour for each session, while next week we wash every alternative day, for a mere 456
20 min each time. As Hume sees it, we have a comparable facility with our 457
perceptions. 458

Hume suggests that we have direct access to and an unencumbered command of 459
our perceptions. As with the bundles of washing in my example, investigators who 460
are intent on exploring the contents of the mind can do so with a high degree of 461
success. This is in large part due to the fact that the nature of the activities engaged in 462
by our perceptions can be determined precisely, in his view. Given that the contents of 463
the mind are all “different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and 464
may be separately consider’d, and may exist separately” (*Treatise* 252) it seems 465
reasonable to assume—as Hume does—that investigators who study the various acts 466
that can be performed by their perceptions are able to construct fairly accurate 467
accounts of the activities observed. 468

But where the mind or self itself is concerned, a serious hurdle needs to be 469
traversed: an obstacle that proves to be insurmountable. Unfortunately we lack any 470
understanding of the location in which these scrutable perceptions are “housed”. To 471
put it somewhat crudely: as with the operation of the washing machine, we can 472
determine the configuration of the contents and operations of the mind. But unlike the 473
washing machine, the location of the mind proves elusive. Without even a “distant 474
notion of the place” where the perceptions act, our understanding of the mind is 475
seriously compromised. Or so we might think. To bypass what might appear to be a 476
fundamental obstacle, and to preserve his commitment to perceptions inviolate, 477
Hume resorts to an ingenious tactic: he *identifies* the mind with its perceptions. 478

The accessibility of our perceptions entails that they are scrutable. As we have 479
seen, this is a highly prized characteristic of perceptions, as far as Hume is concerned. 480
But the mind does not appear to be scrutable. Without even a faint understanding of 481
the mind itself—as opposed to an understanding of its contents, namely its percep- 482
tions—the location of the (attractively scrutable) perceptions cannot be studied. This 483
could prove to be a serious stumbling block in the new science of human nature. To 484

cite an analogous situation: ichthyologists interested in the carp have much to gain 485
 from the study of the environment in which these fish breed and survive. An account 486
 of the carp that leaves out an investigation of its particular surroundings is therefore 487
 incomplete and likely misleading. So the inability to systematically explore the 488
 environment in which our important perceptions exist could seriously undermine 489
 the value of the contributions of researchers interested in learning about the mind. 490
 However, if the mind can be identified with its perceptions the apparent inscrutability 491
 of the mind can be shown to be little more than a trifling issue in the search for a 492
 complete understanding of the mind and its contents. So it comes as no surprise to 493
 find that Hume presents his identity thesis *immediately* after his deflationary remarks 494
 on the scrutability of the mind. Having warned us against speculating on the nature of 495
 the mind and its location, while simultaneously applauding the virtues of perceptions, 496
 Hume asserts that the mind is composed of perceptions, and *only* perceptions: “They 497
 are the successive perceptions only, that *constitute* the mind.” (*Treatise* 253, my 498
 emphasis). While we lack any understanding of the location of the perceptions, this 499
 shortcoming ought not to concern us: our presumably extensive knowledge of the 500
 perceptions and their activities more than compensates for the lacuna. Having 501
 identified the mind with its perceptions, the knowledge that we have of perceptions 502
 more than compensates for our initial ignorance of the mind itself. But this is not to 503
 say that the mind cannot be known. The initial, possibly deflationary realization that 504
 the mind is inscrutable ought to be tempered by the insight that the mind happens to 505
 be its contents. So there is a way out of the conundrum, as Hume sees it. Hume’s 506
 thesis that postulates the identification of the mind with its perceptions carries with it 507
 a distinct *epistemological* advantage over the view of his rivals with their commit- 508
 ment to a (mysterious) substantial self with its perceptions: knowledge of the mind *is* 509
 now possible, as far as Hume is concerned. So individual minds *can* be known—but 510
 unfortunately only known *indirectly*—by virtue of the logical connection between 511
 minds and their accessible contents, i.e., their scrutable perceptions. Once we realize 512
 that minds *are* their perceptions—that they are one and the same—the investigation 513
 into these minds, or selves, can continue unabated. And in the process, a broad 514
 understanding of minds in general will hopefully emerge. With Hume’s identity 515
 thesis, there now appears to be light at the end of the tunnel. What initially appeared 516
 to be a frustrating insurmountable hurdle is thus to be viewed as a mere bump in the 517
 road towards a more robust, scientific understanding of a person. 518

This identification of the mind with its perceptions inaugurates a major transition 519
 in Hume’s discourse on the self. The section “Of personal identity” opens with a 520
 severe critical flourish intended to expose the alleged shortcomings of the traditional 521
 account of the self. In this opening section, the substance theory of the self is 522
 subjected to a relentless attack from Hume. Given its broad appeal to both philoso- 523
 phers and the vulgar it seems unlikely that any substitute account of the mind will 524
 pass muster with supporters of the substance theory of the self. Can there be another 525
 account of the self that is as attractive as the popular received view? Perhaps not. 526
 However, it turns out that all is not lost. Hume’s blistering criticisms of his rivals 527
 serves as a somber backdrop to his more optimistic positive account of the self, 528
 assisting him in his attempt to sharply contrast the staid, opaque, and mysterious 529
 entrenched metaphysical view of the self with the more enlightened, straightforward, 530
 and scientific account. So when Hume turns to his own alternative understanding of 531

the issue on the self, he injects what he clearly assumes is a healthy dose of constructive insight into the analysis. As I see it, his suggestion that we accept his identity thesis on the mind ought to be seen in this light. For with this identification, knowledge unencumbered by the specter of questionable speculations on the inaccessible substantial mind or self now becomes possible. This desirable outcome is not possible with the established conception of the self. But we need to accept that this at best is an *indirect* inroad into knowledge of the mind, or self. As such, this indirect knowledge will be less certain than that that had initially been sought by investigators into the mind. Nevertheless, one might console oneself with the thought that a little knowledge is better than none. But is the mitigated optimism endemic to this inroad into the self through an investigation of its perceptions warranted? Perhaps not, for reasons that I need to explain.

The suggestion that a mind consists exclusively of its perceptions is bold and ingenious. However, it begs a few fundamental questions that give rise to responses that can undermine this innovative proposal from Hume. Unless these questions are dealt with adequately, it seems that Hume's identity thesis and more broadly his account of the self is likely to falter. More pointedly, the bold thesis that the mind can, and ought to be identified with its perceptions can be viewed as an unintelligible thesis. And if this damning indictment holds, the search for evidence for the thesis is moot. All of which would raise serious questions about the status of the so-called bundle thesis itself. While the suggestion from Hume that a person is "nothing but a bundle of perceptions" gives rise to a number of difficult issues, there are two challenging aspects of this thesis that strike me as especially problematic.

In the first place, there is what we can call the ownership problem: can we be certain that the set of perceptions that we are investigating belongs to a specific individual? More pointedly, how do we ensure that an investigation of the *contents* of a particular mind can be regarded as representative of *that* mind, and not of some other mind? What is it about an individual's perceptions that mark them as hers, and not as belonging to someone else? Hume does not say anything on this important issue. If direct knowledge of minds is not independently obtainable, as Hume insists, the proposal that we work with substitutes, such as the perceptions that belong to a person, poses a serious problem for the researcher. As accessible as these perceptions might prove to be, the investigation of an individual's perceptions on their own cannot determine whose perceptions are being considered. As Hume is not willing to countenance any other entities in his definition of a person investigators intent on learning about an individual's mind have nothing else to rely on in their research other than the dispossessed perceptions. Nothing but these perceptions without any manifest affiliation are permitted to serve as candidates for the investigator exploring the mind, in Hume's view. Given these tight restraints facing the researcher into the self, surely something needs to be said about the problem facing researchers who attempt to associate or connect a person's (reputably knowable) perceptions with their (reputably unknowable) mind. Unfortunately, Hume is silent on this important issue.

A second and arguably more serious problem demands attention. Hume's thesis that the mind can be identified with its contents seems implausible, if not nonsensical. A person is capable of performing a multitude of mental and emotional acts, from falling in love to thinking and getting excited, to cite but three activities. Does it make sense to suggest that it is the perceptions in each case that is falling in love, thinking,

and getting excited? Surely *people* fall in love, think, and get excited, not the contents 579
 of their minds. It is not my perception that is in love but me. Certainly, when one 580
 engages in any of these acts the mind is in a particular state and a variety of mental 581
 activities can be identified and reported on. But to boldly imply that we accept that it 582
 is the contents of the mind, namely one's perceptions, that is in love and not the 583
 person to whom these perceptions belong is nonsensical, if not false. The implication 584
 that it is not the *person* who possesses these perceptions, but that it is the collection of 585
 perceptions itself that is in love on the face of it seems absurd. 586

The prospect that Hume's bundle thesis is meaningless carries with it serious 587
 ramifications, not least of which is the suggestion that the search for evidence for 588
 the thesis is moot. But when Hume presents us with his bold thesis that the mind *is* its 589
 perceptions, he presents his view in a dramatic manner. His dogmatic claim 590
 broaches no compromising exceptions. As far as he is concerned, there is not 591
 a Scylla of a doubt that this account of the mind or self is correct and 592
 unassailable. What is more, he is adamant that we not be tempted by the 593
 possibility that there is anything more to the mind than its perceptions: the 594
 mind is its perceptions *and only its perceptions*. As he sees it, the thesis *as it stands* 595
 is true and by implication meaningful. So when he presents his theater analogy, he 596
 insists that we not weaken his thesis and possibly confuse matters with the consid- 597
 eration of what he implies would be extraneous questions. In particular, Hume 598
 advises us not to be tempted to speculate about the conceptual distinction between 599
 the mind and its contents: 600

The comparison of the theater must not mislead us. They are the successive 602
 perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion 603
 of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it 604
 is compos'd. (*Treatise* 253) 605

This unqualified identification of the mind with its perceptions is categorical, or 606
 absolute, as far as Hume is concerned. Clearly confident of his position here, Hume 608
 brooks absolutely no reservations about the thesis. As he sees it, there is no need for 609
 either conceptual or semantic refinements to his bold thesis. That is to say, we don't 610
 require an understanding of the location of the mind to know what it is and the 611
 statements articulating this thesis can be presumed to be meaningful. But what 612
 accounts for Hume's confidence in this identification of the mind with its content? 613
 More pointedly, what reasons does he provide us for adopting the assumption that his 614
 thesis on the self is conceptually self-contained and semantically sufficient? As I have 615
 suggested above, in Hume's view there are distinct *tactical reasons* for the adoption 616
 of this controversial thesis. As I argued, perhaps the thesis ought to be seen as a 617
 heuristic device, possibly pregnant with instructive suggestions. With this pragmatic 618
 conception of a person, many of the intractable problems on the mind can now be 619
 reclassified as accessible problems about perceptions. But are there more *substantial* 620
reasons for accepting the proposal that the mind is its perceptions? And do any of 621
 these reasons bear on either of the two concerns that I am raising here on the 622
 conceptual and semantic dimensions of the thesis? Given the longevity and perva- 623
 siveness of the traditional view of a person, this novel account of a person from Hume 624
 is most unlikely to win over many converts without convincing arguments. So what 625
 can be said in support of this fledgling philosophical thesis that might tempt the 626

traditionalists to change their minds? And most important, has *Hume* provided us with any justification for his bold identity thesis on the mind?

As it happens, Hume does provide us with empirical reasons for this identification, and as far as he is concerned, these reasons are sufficient to establish the viability of his view, both conceptually and semantically. As he sees it, his *personal experiences* confirm this (counterintuitive) thesis that identifies the mind with its perceptions. Furthermore, as he sees it, there is no end to the range and extent of the requisite evidence for this thesis. Early in the section “Of personal identity”, Hume commits himself to the ontology of perceptions, as we have seen. Having stressed the centrality of perceptions where the search for an understanding the self is concerned, Hume argues that if we possess a clear idea of the self we must possess a set of distinguishable and separate impressions, or perceptions. Now Hume assumes that he has a clear understanding of who he is. That is to say, he believes that the idea that he possess of himself is clear. But precisely who or what is the self that is David Hume? Intent on discovering who he is, Hume relies on an *empirical* investigation of himself that yields a report of his private explorations into the content of his mind that he shares with us in the *Treatise* that is interesting, and controversial. For when he explores himself to determine precisely who he is, he encounters perceptions and nothing else. The private mental world that he explores—reputedly *his* private mental world—apparently consists of perceptions, and only perceptions. He presents his empirical evidence in a dispassionate, straightforward manner:

...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. (*Treatise* 252)

From Hume’s point of view, the perceptions that he encounters in his investigation into himself are pervasive entities. Wherever he turns his attention he encounters perceptions. So much so, that he suggests that without them he would not exist. These perceptions constitute his very being.

When my perceptions are remov’d 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 remov’d by death, and cou’d I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I shou’d be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity. (*Treatise* 252)

So perceptions are fundamental to Hume’s existence: they appear to constitute the essence of his existence. But they also constitute the foundation of his theory of the self. This is interesting in that perceptions are reputed to do double duty. On the one hand, from a *philosophical* point of view the perceptions that exist in abundance are important in that they provide the means for Hume to substantiate his controversial account of the self. For a philosopher intent on making his mark in the burgeoning science of human nature this is not an insignificant feat. On the other hand, and equally important, is the *existential* impact of the realization that perceptions are vital constituents of his being. Not only do perceptions serve as the means to verify his philosophical thesis on the self, they happen to constitute the very essence of his

existence as a person. Without his perceptions he would neither be able to confirm his thesis on the self, and most importantly for him, he would not be in the position to determine that he is a person, with an identity, for he would not be.

Here, we have the prime reasons for Hume's decision to prioritize perceptions in his ontological scheme: his existence and his understanding of this existence are founded on his perceptions, as far as he is concerned. While access to perceptions makes it possible to solve many intellectual problems on the mind or self, and enables investigators to expand the new science of human nature it is their perceptions that sustain them in the first place. Without their invaluable perceptions individuals would cease to be persons.⁶ Well, as least as far as Hume's understanding of himself is concerned: "nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity." (*Treatise* 252). Without his perceptions Hume would cease to be a person—and he reputedly knows it.⁷

From this, it follows that a great deal hinges on Hume's identification of the mind with its perceptions. As controversial and counterintuitive as the thesis might prove to be, it now becomes apparent that from Hume's perspective this is a thesis that is central to his conception of himself. However, its importance notwithstanding, additional questions about the justification for this question-begging thesis linger. Just as one would be reluctant to accept the suggestion that the washing machine—to return to my example—is its dirty clothes, so one would surely not willingly concede to the proposal that the mind can be identified with its perceptions? On the face of it, what appears to be Hume's identification of the mind with its contents seems conceptually implausible and the thesis itself unintelligible, if not flagrantly false. Yet, a case can be made that the adoption of this identification has attractive practical consequences, and that the thesis, therefore, ought to be classified as intelligible, at least from a pragmatic point of view. Let us consider some of the practical benefits of this controversial proposal from Hume on the constitution of the mind or self in order to better appreciate the role that Hume has assigned for this thesis in his search for a viable account of the self.

As we have seen, Hume is adamant that the mind itself—unlike its perceptions—is elusive: at least from a conceptual point of view, if not from an existential point of view. Apparently, we are unable to even conceive of the location of the mind's perceptions, let alone able to isolate and separately study the mind in any direct manner. Hence, the bold unusual suggestion that the mind is its perceptions, thereby eliminating the need to search for the mysterious mind on its own. As counterintuitive as this suggestion might appear to be, the thesis that the mind is its perceptions has its merits. Some of the advantages of this strange thesis emerge from a consideration of the following example. As I type this paragraph, a Mr. Obama lives in the White House in Washington DC. Naturally, he happens to be the current president of the USA. So Mr. Obama *is* the current president of the USA: that is to say, he can be identified with the office holder of the highest political position in the USA. What is

⁶ One is reminded of Berkeley's doctrine from his *Principles* that to be is to be perceived: *esse est percipi*.

⁷ But precisely where does this conception of himself come from? Surely not from his impressions? For this would appear to be circular: impressions would then be asked to both serve as the means to *verify* his thesis on the identification of the mind with its impressions and to serve as the *source* of his conception of himself. Something needs to be said by Hume on this important issue. Unfortunately, he appears to be silent on the issue.

important is that knowledge of his residency in the White House is not necessary for our understanding of his presidency. All that is required is an understanding of his activities while serving as the president of the US. From our knowledge of Mr. Obama and his current activities, we can construct an understanding of his current standing in the US. That is to say, we can determine that he is the president and more importantly, develop an understanding of his presidency from this vantage point. And the more extensive and detailed our insight into his current activities, the deeper our understanding of his particular presidency will be. In short, to know about the nature of Obama's presidency, it helps to know about his activities. *No knowledge of the White House itself is called for.* For all intents and purposes, the activities of Mr. Obama exhaustively determine the nature of his presidency. And if knowledge of the Obama presidency does not presuppose access to the White House the statements that we construct when reporting on this presidency will be meaningful even if they focus exclusively on the activities of the incumbent president. This seems to be Hume's view where the mind is concerned.

To know what the mind is, it is helpful to know how its contents operate: there is no need to know *where* the mind is located. If Hume is correct and we have not "the most distant notion of the place ...or of the materials, of which it is compos'd", we ought not to be bothered. In our efforts to understand what a person is, these turn out to be issues that need not concern us, as we have direct access to our perceptions and can directly perceive their diverse activities. And if knowledge of our perceptions can serve as an adequate basis of our understanding of the mind, the statements that we construct on the mind can be intelligible even if they refer exclusively to these perceptions. So the identification of the mind with its active perceptions, on the surface at least, appears to be one of expediency, enabling us to bypass both conceptual and existential obstacles that might otherwise constitute major impediments in our research into a person. Most importantly for Hume, the adoption of this thesis enables the researcher into the self to scientifically test their understanding of the mind. In other words, the practical benefits of this thesis speak volumes for this approach to a problem than many had regarded as intractable. Equipped with this thesis, the scientist interested in human nature simply needs to follow the evidence wherever it leads: determine the nature of one's perceptions and monitor their activity to construct a reliable scientific account of the mind.

But is this move even necessary? The proposal that the mind is its perceptions, with the implication that investigators explore perceptual evidence in order to develop a reliable understanding of an individual's mind can be shown to be moot. A strong argument can be made, as I shall demonstrate below, that there is no need for investigators to take *any* evidence into account when they attempt to assess Hume's identification thesis on the mind. For an intrepid contributor adamant that the burgeoning science of human nature not contain "any principles which are not founded on [the] authority" of experience, this outcome could be embarrassing, if not downright devastating. (*Treatise* xviii)

While it is a relatively straightforward matter to take stock of the different items in the mind, attempts to construct a plausible account of the mind itself are fraught with difficulties, as Hume has made plain in his analysis. While perceptions are scrutable, as we have seen, Hume's view is that their location is beyond our reach. Unlike the washing machine—to return to my example yet again—where it presumably is a

simple matter to determine the location of the machine, the mind proves to be more 764
 elusive. While both the *contents* of the washing machine and the *machine itself* are 765
 temporally and spatially determinate, and therefore conceivable or intelligible to 766
 anyone intent on learning about the machine and its contents, the mind proves not 767
 to be as accessible. Where the mind is concerned, according to Hume, the synchronicity 768
 between the mind and its contents breaks down: while perceptions are presumed 769
 to be intelligible, by virtue of the fact that they are both temporally and 770
 presumably spatially determinate, the mind that is thought to contain these intelligible 771
 perceptions, while presumably temporally determinate, is not spatially determinate, 772
 and therefore unknowable. As Hume sees it, it is the lack of *spatial* determinateness 773
 that entails that the mind cannot be known. While temporally determinate, the mind is 774
 reputedly not spatially determinate. As he sees it, this entails that we do not possess 775
 even a distant notion to form the most rudimentary understanding of the mind. While 776
 we might have expected the mind to be as accessible and as comprehensible as its 777
 contents—its constantly changing perceptions are accessible both spatially and 778
 temporally, and thus knowable—there appears to be a significant disparity here, according 779
 to Hume. But if the self or mind is as inaccessible as Hume suggests it is, we are 780
 unable to determine with any confidence what the properties are of the referent of the 781
 term “self”. Not knowing what the mind or self is from any direct experience of it, we 782
 are resigned to speculating on its nature. Lacking even a most rudimentary understanding 783
 of the mind, because we apparently do not possess “the most distant notion 784
 of the place” where our perceptions interact, we would not be able to recognize the 785
 mind had we to somehow encounter it in our investigations. That is to say, while the 786
 contents of the mind—i.e., its perceptions—presumably can be known and their 787
 properties determined, the mind or self remains a mystery, its properties apparently 788
 beyond our grasp. But if the properties of the self are as evasive as Hume implies they 789
 are, the attempt to establish an identity between the self and its perceptions is fraught 790
 with difficulties. For unless one can determine the properties of the extensions of *both* 791
 of the terms “perceptions” and “self”, one cannot determine the truth value of the 792
 statement asserting an identity between the referents of these terms. And a statement 793
 that is necessarily undecidable is surely to be viewed as scientifically useless, if not 794
 meaningless. So a great deal hinges on the problems generated by Hume’s claim that 795
 we do not possess “the most distant notion of the place” where our perceptions 796
 interact. Hume’s conception of the self will be seriously compromised unless these 797
 problems are dealt with adequately. Let us briefly explore this potential threat to 798
 Hume’s views on the self. 799

Consider the following identity statement: Mia is Helen’s daughter. The two 800
 singular expressions “Mia” and “Helen’s daughter” happen to each have a referent: 801
 namely, a lovely, blue-eyed, young woman who is twenty-two years old. Had either 802
 of the singular expressions lacked a referent attempts to determine the truth-status of 803
 the identity sentence containing these expressions would fail, entailing that the 804
 identity statement is not verifiable.⁸ In this case, I suggest that it would be appropriate 805
 to classify the identity sentence that contains the two singular expressions “Mia” and 806

⁸ It would not be verifiable at the moment, but had the singular expressions to acquire extensions in the future the identity statement would become verifiable then. In short, the identity statement is a contingent statement, dependent on the circumstances.

“Helen’s daughter” as scientifically meaningless. Now, suppose that the identity sentence contains singular expressions that happen to refer to entities that for some reason we are unable to access. Perhaps we don’t know who Helen is and are therefore unable to determine whether or not Mia is Helen’s daughter. In this case, the failure to acquire knowledge of the referent of one of the singular expressions undermines our attempt to assess the truth-status of the identity sentence. But if knowledge of the referent is beyond our capabilities, so is knowledge of the properties of that entity. In this case, we are precluded from knowing about the relationship between the referents of the two singular expressions, i.e., we are unable to determine that both singular expressions refer to the same entity.⁹ The inability to determine the nature or properties of the entity that is referred to by the singular expression “Helen’s daughter” therefore precludes us from determining the truth-status of the identity sentence “Mia is Helen’s daughter”. Without the necessary knowledge of the referent, this sentence must remain an undecidable sentence. And in this case, the sentence appears to be scientifically meaningless, and possibly useless: an outcome that clearly has important implications for Hume’s thesis on the mind.

When Hume presents us with his views on the inscrutability of the mind, as he does with his theater analogy when he maintains that we do not possess “the most distant notion of the place where these scenes are represented”, he trades on the assumption that there actually is a place where our perceptions interact. Unfortunately, as he sees it, this location must remain a mystery. That is to say, he assumes that there is a mind that contains the interacting perceptions. But if the place where our perceptions interact is as conceptually inaccessible as he suggests it is, our attempts to say anything significant about the mind must fail. Not knowing what the mind is prevents us from constructing meaningful statements on the mind. All of this suggests that Hume’s bold suggestion on the constitution of the mind that he made earlier in the section “Of personal identity” is equally problematic. That is to say, his identity thesis that we are “nothing but a bundle or collection of perceptions” appears to be meaningless. For this proposal appears to rest on the assumption that both of the singular terms in this thesis of identity have extensions that are knowable: a condition that is explicitly ruled out with his injunction against singular terms about the mind.

Now, Hume clearly believes that his account of the self is *not* meaningless. Far from it. As he sees it, his thesis on the self has a meaning different to that traditionally ascribed to the theory of the self. After outlining his criticisms of his rivals’ view on the self, with their endorsement of an ontology committed to a mysterious constant substantial self, Hume concludes his critique on a telling note, suggesting that the idea of the self that does exist is not the same as that alluded to by his rivals:

It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv’d; and *consequently there is no such idea.* (*Treatise* 252, my emphasis)

It’s not that there is no idea of the self, but that “no such idea” of the self happens to exist. The strong suggestion here is that *if* there is an idea of the self, it is not the

⁹ My argument here trades on what I believe is the traditional conception of identity provided to us by Leibniz. That is to say, X can be identified with Y if, and only if the properties of X are the same as the properties of Y.

one that other philosophers thought existed. These remarks have misled many 851
 commentators, especially the final words in this conclusion that “there is no such 852
 idea”. Hume is not saying that there is no idea associated with the word “self”, but 853
 explicitly saying that the idea that his rivals assume does exist actually does not: that 854
 they are seriously mistaken in presupposing that there is an idea of a substantial self. 855
 As he sees it, the idea of a substantial unchanging self that his rivals are writing about 856
 cannot be generated by our impressions and it therefore does not exist: 857

It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, the 859
 idea of self is deriv'd...(*Treatise* 252) 860

But does this negative response to the widespread view on the substantial 862
 self entail anything positive? If so, what exactly can we infer from Hume’s 863
 critique here? In particular, can this criticism be construed as supporting the 864
 suggestion that there is another *different* idea for the term “self” for Hume, as I am 865
 proposing here? I think so. 866

The conclusion that “no such idea” exists rests on Hume’s investigation of his 867
 dynamic impressions or perceptions. As he sees it, the careful exploration of these 868
 ever changing perceptions that “succeed each other, and never all exist at the same 869
 time” undermines the assumption endemic to the view of the self promoted by his 870
 rivals that there is an impression that does not change over time. There simply is no 871
 unchanging impression, constant over time. That is to say, the assumption that an 872
 impression exists that is “invariably the same, thro’ the whole course of our lives” is 873
 not borne out by the perceptual evidence available to each one of us. (*Treatise* 251). 874
 In the light of this evidence, we are strongly encouraged to subscribe to a new view of 875
 the self according to which we are invited to accept the more circumspect view that if 876
 there actually is an idea associated with the term “self” it will necessarily differ 877
 significantly from that originally thought to be aligned with the term. While he does 878
 not do this, I shall refer to this tentative idea as Hume’s purported potential idea, or 879
 PPI, for short. This possible idea, the PPI that Hume is encouraging us to subscribe to, 880
 is reputed to be a composite idea, unlike the simple idea of an unchanging substantial 881
 self touted by his rivals. Adopting the view that all ideas are copies of prior 882
 impressions that caused them, Hume suggests that the proposal that an individual 883
 possesses a simple idea of an unchanging substantial self is unacceptable, and 884
 conflicts with the evidence that is readily available to each one of us. As he sees it, 885
 the realization that we are aware of the existence of many impressions or perceptions 886
 entails that the proposal from his rivals involves a “manifest contradiction and 887
 absurdity”. (*Treatise* 251). The cluster of different discrete constantly changing 888
 impressions cannot result in the production of a single unchanging idea of the self. 889
 To suggest otherwise is to negate the presumably more scientifically respectable view 890
 that each idea is produced by a preceding impression: a position sacrosanct to Hume. 891
 No, what is more likely to exist, if any idea of the self does exist, suggests Hume, is a 892
 composite idea of the self, each element of which has been produced by a separate 893
 impression. So the idea of the self, if there is one, is most likely to be a composite idea 894
 that has been generated by a stream of forever changing impressions. 895

Nevertheless, there are some philosophers who will persist with their traditional 896
 view of the self. Hume acknowledges this. With a somewhat exasperated tone, he 897
 concludes that others might disagree with him on this score, insisting on the existence 898

of a simple idea of an unchanging substantial self. This obstinacy has no counter, 899
suggests Hume: 900

If any one upon serious and unprejudic'd reflexion, thinks he has a different notion 902
of himself, I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, 903
that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this 904
particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu'd, which he 905
call himself; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me. (*Treatise* 252) 906
907

Hume clearly has little patience with these unscientific thinkers: individuals he 908
disparaging refers to as "some metaphysicians of this kind." (*Treatise* 252). These 909
obstinate thinkers from his point of view are beyond the pale, immune from his 910
arguments, and presumably beyond the reach from any other reasonable approaches. 911
As he laments, "I must confess I can reason no longer with him." (*Treatise* 252). But 912
is the adoption of Hume's alternative idea, what I am calling his PPI, any less 913
problematic than the endorsement of an account of the self that is committed to the 914
existence of a substantial self? What reasons are there for assuming that speculations 915
about the existence of a purported potential idea of the self are more reasonable than 916
speculations on the existence of a mysterious substantial self? This is a question that I 917
am not able to consider here. 918
919

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