

IS HUME ATTEMPTING TO INTRODUCE A NEW, PRAGMATIC CONCEPTION OF A CONTRADICTION IN HIS *TREATISE*?

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Abstract. Hume's *Treatise*, with its celebrated bundle theory of the self, is a significant contribution to the embryonic Newtonian experimental philosophy of the enlightenment. But the theory is inadequate as it stands, as the appendix to the *Treatise* makes clear. For this account of the self, apparently, rests on contradictory principles — propositions, fortunately, that can be reconciled, according to Hume. My paper is a critical exploration of Hume's argument for this intriguing suggestion.

Keywords: Contradiction; Aristotle; law of non-contradiction; bundle theory; labyrinth; pragmatism; self; *Treatise*; experimental philosophy; appendix.

In general, this work is full of original thoughts that have all the merit of singularity.

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The bundle theory of the self that David Hume develops in section VI of his *Treatise of Human Nature* in 1739 is a bold, and provocative account of a person. As might be expected, the suggestion that an individual is, "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions" (Hume 1978, p.252) has elicited a wide range of vigorous critical responses from many concerned thinkers, philosophers and non-philosophers alike.¹ Ironically enough, the charge against the theory began *immediately* after its formulation — by its own author! Hume is the first to point out that his innovative account of a person, that is central to his conception of personal identity, has to contend with a number of serious problems. Most importantly, as far as Hume is concerned, his *Treatise* view of a person is incomplete as it stands: what is required is a more robust foundation with additional, unfortunately elusive principles. These reservations about his views on a person are relegated to the final few pages of the *Treatise*.

In the appendix for his *magnum opus*, Hume argues that his account of the self is seriously defective. The labyrinth that he suggests he has driven himself into in order to solve the problem of the self appears to be intractable, due in large measure to the incompatibility of two of the pillars, or principles as he calls them, which support his bundle theory of the self: one on the nature of perceptions, the other on the capabilities of the mind:

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In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.* (Hume 1978, p.636, Hume's emphasis)

But the situation is not hopeless, thinks Hume. Someone might be able to show that these principles are actually consistent, and accordingly, resolve the problem of the self by dissolving the labyrinth:

Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflection, may *discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions.* (Hume 1978, p.636, my emphasis)

This suggestion is intriguing. The assumption that an additional proposition might be able to “reconcile those contradictions” that currently undermine his account of the self, calls for closer attention. For the suggestion that one can reconcile contradictions encourages one to assume that for Hume the discrepancy between the two principles that he desires to reconcile is not as pronounced as originally suggested. In that case, perhaps the logical gap between the two principles that apparently support Hume’s views on the self is not as great as he originally suggested. And if Hume’s view is that these principles are not as strongly opposed to each other as his terminology leads us to believe they are, a fascinating interpretation of his remarks above on the prospects of reconciliation emerges: perhaps Hume, in his *Treatise* analysis of the problems of the self is attempting to introduce a novel conception of a contradiction. As I shall argue below, the evidence suggests that Hume is trading on a non-standard conception of a contradiction in his reflections on his labyrinth and the problems with his theory of the self. More specifically, I shall show that the esteemed Scottish philosopher, who is attempting “to introduce the experimental method into moral subjects”, has been drawn to a non-traditional, *pragmatic* conception of a contradiction in his endeavors.²

1. Hume’s conception of a contradiction

As pointed out above, Hume bemoans the fact that his *Treatise* account of the self is seriously deficient, resting as it apparently does on two inconsistent propositions, or principles, as he prefers to call them. At the outset it is important to notice that the two propositions that Hume has singled out for consideration are *different*, thus posing a serious problem for his assertion that two of the major principles in his account of the self involve a contradiction - a contradiction that hopefully someone will be able to solve. But the adoption of two different propositions on their own logically cannot entail a contradiction. This can be shown easily enough. Let “A” represent

one proposition and “B” a second, different proposition. The conjunction of the two propositions is not contradictory:

1. A
2. B / Therefore, $\sim(A \cdot B)$

Of course, this argument is invalid: the two different premises, “A” and “B” on their own, cannot entail $\sim(A \cdot B)$. All of which suggests that Hume’s comments and reasoning on the logical relationship between the two different propositions that underlie his bundle theory of the self are problematic. For the suggestion that two propositions contradict each other amounts to the proposal that they are mutually exclusive, according to the traditional conception of a contradiction: if the one proposition is true, the other must be false. That is to say, the assertion of the one proposition strictly entails the denial of the other. As Aristotle suggests, when outlining his law of non-contradiction in his *Metaphysics*, “opposite assertions cannot be true at the same time” (*Metaph* IV 6 1011b13-20).³ But the two principles that Hume draws on as support for his bundle theory of the self in the appendix to his *Treatise*, as they stand, are not opposite assertions, and therefore, *can be true at the same time*. From this it follows that if Hume is assuming that it is logically possible to reconcile the two different propositions that underlie his account of the self, and if he does maintain that these (different) propositions are contradictory — as his remarks in the appendix to the *Treatise* suggests is the case — he must be drawing on a non-Aristotelian conception of a contradiction. All of which suggests that when Hume claims that two of his major supporting theses in his account of the self are contradictions, it is reasonable to assume that he is not using the term “contradiction” in the strict traditional sense outlined here.

So perhaps Hume in the appendix to the *Treatise* is using the word “contradiction” in a non-traditional sense. That this is a plausible interpretation of his understanding of a contradiction is strengthened when we take into account his later suggestion about a third proposition serving as a means to reconcile the apparent contradiction. As I understand the traditional, Aristotelian conception of a contradiction, given the prescriptions of the law of non-contradiction, propositions in a contradictory state of affairs cannot be reconciled *i.e.* they are logically incompatible. What then does Hume mean when he uses the word “reconcile”? Unfortunately for us, he does not explain this important term in the appendix. Nor does he elaborate on this term in his discussion of personal identity in the main section of the *Treatise*. So we are on our own. But we are not completely at sea, for Hume does provide us with some interesting material in the appendix that we can use to construct a workable *pragmatic* understanding of the term.

2. Hume on “reconcile”

When Hume declares that he is in a quandary, unable to “render consistent” the two principles that he views as contradictions, he explicitly makes reference to a state of affairs that in his opinion could rescue the day:

Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in the case. (Hume 1978, p.636)

If only humans were more capable or the world of perceptions different, we could resolve the conflict that bedevils the *Treatise* account of the self. More specifically if perceptions were supported by a substance — presumably an indivisible self — or if the mind could discern the connections alleged to exist between our perceptions, the problem alluded to by Hume in the appendix would disappear. That is to say, there would be no inconsistency between the two principles that form the basis of his account of the self. Reality, unfortunately, being what it is, the inconsistency persists:

But no connexions among distinct existences are ever discoverable by human understanding. We only *feel* a connexion or a determination of the thought, to pass from one object to another. (Hume 1978, p.635, Hume's emphasis)

But precisely how would a change to the reality that Hume outlines, or even the adoption of a different reality or ontology, resolve the contradiction that allegedly is endemic to his account of the self? For that matter, had there to be a world where perceptions are supported by substances and our minds could discern the connections between our perceptions, the question remains: could even this world solve Hume's problem?

At first blush it seems that alterations to reality, or perhaps the adoption of a different ontology, cannot solve Hume's problem. Was his not a problem about the incompatibility or inconsistency of propositions or principles? But propositions, in an important sense, are not in the world — they are apart from it, and possibly about the world and its constituents. Propositions occupy a realm different to that occupied by the constituents of the world. So precisely how can a change in the world resolve the logical or linguistic problem that Hume is referring to in the appendix? Hume does not tell us, unfortunately, but there are interesting hints in the *Treatise* that might prove useful. As I shall show, the adoption of a *pragmatic* interpretation of his remarks on his “inconsistency problem” in the appendix offers the prospect of a successful resolution of his quandary.

I think that an answer lies buried in the appendix. Immediately after outlining an idealized world that he suggests can resolve the problem of the inconsistent principles, Hume informs us of a second way out of the labyrinth. As he sees it, the discovery of a suitable hypothesis also enables us to settle the matter:

Others, perhaps or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some *hypothesis*, that will reconcile those contradictions. (Hume 1978, p.636, my emphasis)

If we can show that two propositions that appear to be irreconcilable are actually not as dissonant as we thought, we will be in the position to remove the contradiction. The reconciliation will need to reduce, and possibly completely eliminate the discrepancy between the two propositions. Hume offers a method to do just this. Early in the appendix he presents what I call a semantic principle that enables philosophers and the vulgar to converse with each other even though their respective world views differ dramatically. This semantic principle holds the key to my question above on the relevance of changes to one's ontology to problems that are logical or linguistic. We need to consider this principle in a little detail.

3. On Hume's *pragmatic, semantic principle*

In his writings Hume makes much of the disparity between philosophers and the uneducated vulgar. The appendix reflections from the *Treatise* on problems with his account of the self provides him with yet another opportunity to explore this issue. As Hume sees it, philosophers and the vulgar can be regarded as individuals locked in an intractable conflict about their respective accounts of reality. The vulgar confidently assert that there are physical objects, such as chimneys and chairs, for instance, while the philosophers are more circumspect and insist on the existence of discrete perceptions. These radically different conceptions of reality suggest that this is an irreconcilable conflict, and that there is a contradiction between their worlds. The discrepancy between these two world views seems to be so significant that the affirmation of the one perspective appears to entail the negation of the other. But in the appendix Hume suggests that a bridge can be erected between these rival perspectives. As he sees it, while each of the competing worlds is legitimate in its own right, or without internal conflict — for there is no contradiction within that world — these fundamentally different worlds can and need to be reconciled, or brought into alignment, if the adherents of these different perspectives are to understand each other. Giving priority to the philosopher, Hume suggests that a semantic principle must be found that shows how to reconcile propositions about physical objects with propositions on perceptions:

... no proposition can be intelligible or consistent with regard to objects, which is not so with regard to perceptions. (Hume 1978, p.634)

Each of these worlds can be successfully understood and described by their respective proponents. Accompanying these consistent — *i.e.* logically harmonious — worlds

there are consistent sets of symbols to refer to these worlds and their contents. The world of the philosopher, with its emphasis on perceptions, for instance, does not involve contradictions:

All perceptions are distinct. They are, therefore, distinguishable, and separable, and may be conceiv'd as separately existent, and may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity. (Hume 1978, p.634)

But the world of the vulgar is equally free of tension or ontological conflict:

But this table, which is present to me, and that chimney, may and do exist separately. This is the doctrine of the vulgar, and implies no contradiction. (Hume 1978, p.634)

However, the discourse of the vulgar, with its references to physical objects, will remain meaningless unless these expressions can be shown to be co-extensive with those of the philosophers. Only those claims about non-perceptions that can be re-written as claims about perceptions can be understood.

Now for Hume, the philosopher's world of perceptions is the touchstone of intelligibility. Hence any proposition that is not about a perception must be translatable into one about perceptions if that proposition is to be regarded as intelligible. It is the educated philosopher who, having determined that the competing discourses entail competing ontological commitments, will be able to reconcile the different worlds. But it is important to recognize that the reconciliation will be conducted on the philosophers' terms. This is not a democratic process with some give or take from both sides of the issues. No. It is an unequal process — an asymmetrical procedure — with priority given to the philosophers' conception of reality. In this way the apparent discrepancies between the world of the philosopher and that of the vulgar can be minimized. With their semantic principle outlining the relationship between perceptions and physical objects the philosophers will be able to relate the two worlds. In short, the philosopher will be able to reconcile the fundamentally different worlds of perceptions and physical objects. The conflict, or contradiction, to use Hume's terminology, can therefore be reconciled.

All of which suggests that Hume's proposal to reconcile the two major principles of his account of the self, amounts to the proposal to formulate a *pragmatic* semantic principle that enables investigators to relate the world of the vulgar to that of the philosopher.⁴ This semantic principle will function as a speculative proposition, or hypothesis, to explicitly connect worlds that might appear to be essentially unrelated to each other. What initially appears to be an irredeemable conflict, or contradiction turns out to be an illusion that can be eliminated with the appropriate ingenuity and equipment. The tool that is needed is the appropriate practical semantic principle, or workable hypothesis to bridge the world of the physical objects with that of perceptions. All that remains is for the philosopher to formulate it and to put it to use.

This helps explain Hume's optimism at the end of the appendix. After outlining the fundamental problem with his account of the self — a problem that on the surface appears to be so serious that he refers to it as an intractable contradiction — he ends on a somewhat positive note. Not wanting to conclude his discussion with the suggestion that the fundamental problem will never be solved, Hume says this:

I pretend not, however, to pronounce it absolutely insuperable. Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions. (Hume 1978, p.636)

In his eyes, the situation is not hopeless. His provocative account of the self, for all its problems, can be saved. A workable, practical compromise can be found to reconcile what appear to be two irreconcilable propositions.

This suggests an interesting view on language. Principles or propositions, as Hume sees it, are not dissimilar to human beings in that they possess a range of properties and manifest various relationships with each other that can be studied, altered or possibly even manipulated. For instance, individual human beings display various levels of integrity. They possess various moral characteristics; some people are good, some are bad, some happy, some depressed, and so on. By the same token propositions also possess attributes that can be identified and studied; some propositions are true, some false, some obscure, some clear, some intelligible, some unintelligible, and so on. And as with human beings, propositions are often related to each other. On occasion the relationship is amicable, on occasion it is tempestuous. And when two propositions conflict with each other the tension between them might reach such a level as to warrant the use of the term "contradiction". This appears to be Hume's assessment of the relationship between the two incompatible principles central to his account of the self. With the traditional, Aristotelian conception of a contradiction it appears that nothing can be done to smooth over the discrepancies between the two principles. But as I have shown above, Hume thinks that the contradiction can be eliminated, provided that a working hypothesis or semantic principle is found that connects the two rival principles. So, there are no logical constraints preventing enterprising researchers from dissolving the apparent contradictions that underlie Hume's account of the self. The labyrinth, so it appears, can be made to disappear.

However, might there not be more to the problem of reconciliation between the philosopher and the vulgar with their respective ontological commitments? Surely the adoption of a suitable semantic principle on its own is unable to smooth over the substantial differences between these different worlds? Consider what happens when one attempts to reconcile competing world views. When we seek to reconcile two individuals — perhaps two brothers who are angry with each other — we strive to establish peace between them — assisting them to bury the hatchet. Where there was a conflict in the past over a specific issue, we hopefully now have some agreement: an

attempt has been made to alter the relationship between the two and establish harmony where previously there was unrest. While the act of reconciliation has helped to reduce the distance between the two brothers, it very likely has not removed the fundamental differences between the brothers — sharp differences in world views that brought about the conflict in the first place. But the world of the vulgar with his ontological commitments to physical objects is fundamentally different to that of the philosopher with her commitment to perceptions. Can these radically different worlds, with their respective perspectives and values be reconciled? This issue on the commensurability of the different world views of the vulgar and the philosopher, as important as it is, must be considered elsewhere.

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Notes

¹ This view of a person has also generated widespread positive responses from a significant segment of Hume's audience. On some of the more recent endorsements of the bundle theory see my paper "Language, and Hume's search for a theory of the self", *Metaphysica: Internationale Fachzeitschrift Für Ontologie Und Metaphysik* (Issue 2) pp.139–158.

² I am alluding to the subtitle of the Hume's *Treatise*: "Being an attempt to introduce the experimental method of reasoning into moral subjects".

³ Here I am referring to the third version of Aristotle's conception of the law of non-contradiction as presented in the excellent presentation in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Gottlieb (2015).

⁴ This suggestion on Hume's pragmatism has been commented on before. For a broad pragmatic interpretation of Hume see Randall (1947).