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THE OWNERSHIP OF PERCEPTIONS: A STUDY OF HUME'S METAPHYSICS

Saul Traiger

I. INTRODUCTION

IN the *Appendix* to his *Treatise of Human Nature*, where he reconsiders his theory of personal identity, David Hume reviews both the steps by which he “loosened” his perceptions from one another, and his attempt to reunite them into one self or person, and he concludes:

But having thus loosen'd all our particular perceptions, when I proceed to explain the principle of connexion, which binds them together, and makes us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity; I am sensible, that my account is defective, and that nothing but the seeming evidence of the precedent reasonings cou'd have induc'd me to receive.¹

A question which immediately arises is: How “loose” and disconnected, how independent, can perceptions be for Hume? We need an answer to this question in order to understand what Hume thought was involved in the reuniting or “binding together” of perceptions. One answer is that the loosening is radical, that Hume's problem is to say how to reunite any particular person's perceptions once they are radically loosened and belong in the fund of all perceptions in the world. This answer is supported by Hume's statement of the problem as involving the loosening of *our* perceptions, i.e., all perceptions of all persons. A second answer is that Hume has only loosened *his* perceptions, but that Hume does not think of the loosened perceptions as potentially not his. On this answer, Hume's problem is to say how to reunite all of his perceptions. In contrast, the first answer suggests that Hume's problem is to determine which perceptions are his.

On the first interpretation, which takes perceptions to be potentially free-floating or unbundled, Hume must account for the ownership of perceptions.² Interpreting Hume as expressing concern over the ownership of perceptions, as explaining how radically loose perceptions are to be bundled into selves, however, leads to a charge of circularity. Hume invokes causal relations to allocate perceptions to minds, but his account of causation presupposes that perceptions are already allocated, since causation is itself a “determination of the mind”; a mind is determined to have the idea which is constantly conjoined with an antecedent impression. If

Hume's theory concerns the reallocation of independent and thus potentially free-floating perceptions to distinct "bundles" or selves, it is circular.³

Interpreting the independence of perceptions in the second way, there is no circularity. Hume is simply showing how each of us comes to attribute a real simplicity and identity to his own mind, in light of the fact that one is presented only with a sequence of loose and independent perceptions. Thus coming to grips with what Hume means by the looseness of our perceptions is crucial to the evaluation of the circularity objection.

A number of passages in the *Treatise* and first *Enquiry* suggest that the task Hume has set for himself is to show how all perceptions are bundled into selves. In both the introduction to the *Treatise* and the introduction to the first *Enquiry* Hume insists that his science of human nature parallels Newton's science of nature.⁴ Relations of causation, resemblance and contiguity are psychological analogues to Newtonian forces; they can in principle be applied universally to any perception, regardless of which mind has them. These passages suggest that Hume has conceived of perceptions and the associative relations in a totally mechanistic way, under the sway of the Newtonian model; thus Hume must show how minds are constituted from the components of the mental universe, perceptions and their relations. In "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" and in the *Appendix* Hume claims that our perceptions are "independent existences" which bear no privileged relations to other perceptions. There is "no absurdity" in "breaking off" all a perception's relations to a mind. (T207) If perceptions can be so independent that they don't have to be in anyone's mind, then Hume must find a procedure for taking such potentially free-floating perceptions and deciding to which mind they belong.

If perceptions can exist independently, then it is circular to assume that perceptions come already bundled as selves, as Hume appears to do in his account of causation. He cannot appeal to relations which just happen to hold among perceptions. Where perceptions can exist apart from any relations that they in fact have, the question: "Why not some other bundling?" is legitimate. To answer it, Hume cannot, without circularity, appeal to causal relations among perceptions.

A close reading of passages where Hume characterizes perceptions as independent existences is needed. I claim that once the full complexity of Hume's views on the independence of perceptions is appreciated, the conception of Hume's problem of personal identity as a problem about the ownership of perceptions cannot be motivated. This defuses the circularity objection. After this has been shown, the claim that Hume was influenced by Newton cannot by *itself* motivate the ownership problem. Hume indeed sees himself as doing in the science of human nature what Newton did for other parts of the natural world. However, if perceptions do not have the independence enjoyed by constituents of the Newtonian

world, then the sense in which Hume's science of man is Newtonian cannot be found in the doctrine of the independence of perceptions.

II. SENSES OF "INDEPENDENCE"

Hume characterizes perceptions as independent in his arguments against substances, when he shows that causal inference is not demonstrative inference, and in his discussion of the continued existence of our perceptions. These passages, I will argue, make use of distinct senses in which perceptions are independent; none suggest the ownership problem.

The passage which appears most threatening to Hume's theory of personal identity occurs in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses." Hume writes:

Now as every perception is distinguishable from another, and may be considered as separately existent; It evidently follows, that there is no absurdity in separating any particular perception from the mind; That is, in breaking off all its relations with that connected mass of perceptions which constitute a thinking being. (T207)

The mind is "nothing but a heap or collection of different perceptions." (T207) Our distinct perceptions can be "broken off" from the heap or bundle, i.e., the mind. Hume says that we can break *all* a perception's relations to a mind. This naturally suggests that we can conceive of perceptions as free-floating or unowned. When the independence of perceptions is understood in this way, the need to establish the ownership of perceptions is acute. Should Hume be read this way? Fortunately, there is a straightforward way to understand Hume's view about the independence of our perceptions in these pages.

Somewhat uncharacteristically, Hume explicitly instructs the reader in the correct sense of the term "perception." In order to account for the opinion of the vulgar, who believe in the external existence of body, Hume announces that he will "entirely conform . . . to their manner of thinking and expressing themselves." (T202) The distinction between our mere perceptions, which are mind-dependent, and their objects, which are independent of the mind, is a philosopher's distinction.

In order, therefore, to accommodate myself to their notions, I shall at first suppose; that there is only a single existence, which I shall call indifferently object or perception, according as it shall seem best to suit my purpose, understanding by both of them what any common man means by a hat, or shoe, or stone, or any other impression, convey'd to him by his senses. I shall be sure to give warning, when I return to a more philosophical way of speaking and thinking. (T202)

Hume's announced use of "perception" continues throughout the passage in which he writes of breaking off a perception's relations to a mind.⁵ Understanding "perception" as whatever is conveyed by the senses, the claim that perceptions can be broken off from the mind is just the claim

that the things we perceive, e.g., hats, shoes, and stones, exist even when they are not perceived. Hume's view thus cannot be understood as a view about the free-floatingness of our mere perceptions, i.e., perceptions understood as mental items. Hume is talking about hats, shoes and stones in this passage, not about impressions and ideas. When he says that the mind is a bundle of these things, Hume, speaking with the vulgar, means that seeing a hat, stone or shoe can influence or be influenced by other "present reflexions and passions," not that the mind is literally composed of hats, stones, or shoes. (T207)

The independence of perceptions in "Of scepticism with regard to the senses" is independence in the sense in which the vulgar believe that hats and shoes do not depend on the mind for their existence. The circularity objection requires that Hume admit the independence of our perceptions in the Humean sense, not in the vulgar sense. If we are to find such an admission, we will have to look elsewhere in the *Treatise*.

Hume resorts to a notion of the independence of our perceptions to refute the substance theories of Descartes and Spinoza. Most commentators have taken his passage, at T233, as establishing the radical independence of perceptions.⁶ The substance theory denies the independence of perceptions. It holds that our perceptions are dependent on something (substance) for their existence. If we understand the substance theory and the argument for it, we will be in a position to appreciate Hume's own view, which is just the denial of the substance theory. Hume, I will argue, encounters the substance theory without holding that perceptions can be conceived of as free-floating or unowned.

An argument against the notion of substance occurs in "Of the immateriality of the soul." If substance is defined simply as "that which can exist by itself" then perceptions are substances, because they can exist by themselves. (T233) The advocates of substance, however, introduced that notion to show that the mind cannot be just a bundle of perceptions. Substances are supposed to contrast with perceptions, and so perceptions should not meet the requirements for substances. That they do is one of Hume's arguments against substances.

What does Hume mean by his claim that perceptions can "exist by themselves" and how does he establish this result, which he depends on to discredit the substance theory? Advocates of substance hold that there can't be perceptions without something which has those perceptions. For substance theorists, perceptions are modes of substances. Hume seems to think that the denial of this view entails that perceptions don't need anything to support their existence.

We must be extremely cautious in our attempt to locate the appropriate sense of "independence" to which Hume is appealing. There is no reason to think that Hume is denying the causal dependence of many of our perceptions on one another. Even here, Hume demands that there be an antecedent simple impression for each simple idea, and this amounts to

an affirmation of the causal dependence of our simple ideas on their antecedent impressions.⁷ Ideas and impressions of reflexion cannot exist independently of other perceptions when independence is understood causally. It does not follow from this, however, that there isn't another sense in which a simple idea has an independent existence.

All perceptions are distinct and separable in the imagination, and "may exist separately, and have no need of anything else to support their existence." (T233) Two principles are invoked to legitimize the inference from the claim about separability of perceptions in imagination to the claim about their separability in existence:

(1) Whatever is clearly conceived may exist, and whatever is clearly conceived after any manner, may exist after the same manner.

(2) Everything which is different is distinguishable, and everything which is distinguishable, is separable by the imagination. (T233)

Hume needs only the premiss that all our perceptions are different from each other to establish their separability in existence. If our perceptions are different, then (by (2)) we can conceive them as being different. For any perception, we can conceive it without conceiving some other perceptions.⁸ By (1), if we can conceive of something as having certain features, then that thing can have those features. Thus any perception, which we can think of as separate from all other perceptions, may exist as such. In this sense, a perception does not depend on anything for its existence. But what is this sense of separability, if it is not causal separability?

Malebranche held just the view of substances which Hume is arguing against. Malebranche's own formulation of the criterion for substance is almost identical to Hume's:

All that is or has being can either be conceived by itself, or it cannot. There is no middle course, for these two propositions are contradictories. Now, all that can be conceived by itself and without the thought of anything else, all, I say, that can be conceived by itself as existing independently of every other thing, and without the idea which we have of it representing any other thing, is assuredly a being or a substance, and all that cannot be conceived by itself and without the thought of anything else is a mode or a modification of Substance.⁹

In light of the historical evidence of Malebranche's influence on Hume and the resemblance of Malebranche's formulation to Hume's, it is likely that this argument inspired Hume's.¹⁰ The disagreement between Malebranche and Hume concerns what meets the criterion for substance. Hume thinks that all perceptions can be conceived by themselves, while Malebranche gives examples of things which cannot. Roundness cannot be thought of without thinking of extension, according to Malebranche. That without which roundness cannot be conceived, namely extension, is a substance. Extension can be thought of "by itself" and counts as a substance.

It is not important to settle the substance debate here. What concerns us is the nature of the test which Hume and Malebranche accept while disagreeing about the outcome. In Hume's terminology, a perception is "distinct and separable" when, at some time t , we can have that perception without having any other perception at t . If we find ourselves unable to do this, with respect to a particular perception, then that perception is not distinct and separable; it is not independent.

Hume maintains that all our perceptions are distinct and independent existences, and by this he means that we could have any one perception without simultaneously having any other. Hume is not suggesting that we can break the *causal* relations which hold among perceptions. Instead he maintains, contra Malebranche, that the mere conception of any perception can be accomplished without simultaneously engaging in the conceiving of some other perception.

To "break off" a perception from the bundle in this context is thus an activity of a mind which has already acquired that perception. The origin of my idea of red is an antecedent simple impression. Now I can think of red without thinking of anything else, including the original impression. It does not follow, however, that my idea has lost its causal relation to the antecedent impression. My idea of red is often accompanied by many other ideas and impressions, but none of these are metaphysically required concomitants of the idea of red. This is not to deny that our ideas are causally dependent on their antecedents.

Understanding what Hume means when he characterizes perceptions as independent in these passages, then, requires that we distinguish the metaphysical independence which, on Hume's view, all perceptions have, from the causal dependence which many of our perceptions have.¹¹ Regardless of how we come to have a perception, that perception now had, does not entail the simultaneous existence of any other perception at that time. We can infer *future* and *past* perceptions from our experience, which consists of many perceptions "flanking" the inferred perception. Taken singly, we can't demonstrate the existence of anything at all beyond a solitary perception.¹²

The metaphysical independence of perceptions is a special case of logical independence. For Hume our perceptions are fully logically, as well as merely metaphysically, independent. This means that any particular relation, e.g., between simple impressions and their corresponding ideas, could fail to hold. If perceptions weren't fully logically independent, however, they could still be metaphysically independent. If it were inconceivable to have an idea of roundness without having had an antecedent simple impression, it would still be possible to conceive the idea without, at the same time, conceiving the impression.

That a wedge can be driven between causal and logical necessity is often taken to be Hume's greatest insight. Well worn *Treatise* arguments establish that the necessity in causation is not logical necessity. For causal necessity to be explicable in terms of logical necessity, perceptions

would have to be non-distinct or logically dependent; we would need the ability to infer the existence of the effect from the cause alone. Hume writes:

There is no object, which implies the existence of any other if we consider these objects in themselves, and never look beyond the ideas which we form of them. Such an inference wou'd amount to knowledge, and wou'd imply the absolute contradiction and impossibility of conceiving any thing different. But as all distinct ideas are separable, 'tis evident there can be no impossibility of that kind. When we pass from a present impression to the idea of any object, we might possibly have separated the idea from the impression, and have substituted any other idea in its room. (T86-7)

It is only when we go beyond the “objects in themselves” and consider the nature of our experience in which our perceptions are embedded that we can begin to make inferences. Although there is causal necessity in the passage from an impression to the idea which is its usual attendant, there is no contradiction in the supposition of a different passage, from the impression to some other idea. Hume’s point is that without looking at the actual “patterns” of our experience, we can’t get our causal inferences going. Viewed apart from the patterns in which they occur, as distinct and independent existences, our perceptions don’t have relations to other perceptions.

Hume’s views on the independence of our perceptions no where suggest that we can think of perceptions as unowned, that we must allocate unowned perceptions into bundles. A question of ownership would arise only if we found that perceptions are causally independent. We saw that Hume has a number of theses about the distinctness or independence of our perceptions. None of these suggest the causal independence of our perceptions. The lack of passages where Hume speaks of perceptions as free-floating, as causally independent, undermines the claim that Hume sets out to determine the ownership of perceptions in his theory of personal identity.¹³

III. PERCEPTIONS AND ANALYSIS

I have argued that when Hume speaks of the independence of mere perceptions as opposed to objects he does not think of them as causally independent of other perceptions. It has not been argued, however, that our mere perceptions could not be causally independent of the perceptions to which they are in fact related. One can concede that Hume never claims causal independence for perceptions and still argue that Hume should have considered this possibility. Causally independent perceptions need to be allocated to bundles.

Had Hume considered causal independence, he would have been forced to change the question of personal identity from “In virtue of what does reflection on my perceptions induce the idea of the self?” to “From all the perceptions in the universe, which perceptions can be counted as my

own?" Without causal relations, there is no way to distinguish one's own perceptions from the perceptions of others. To allow causal independence is not to say that perceptions other than the ones a person in fact has had could have been in the causal nexus comprising a person's mind. What is suggested is that any prior causal consideration about the allocation of perceptions to minds should have been dropped by Hume before confronting the problem of personal identity.

The issue of the ownership of perceptions can thus be raised as an *omission* on Hume's part, not as something about which Hume had the wrong view. It is simply a mistake to construe Hume's explicit views about personal identity as views about how we can decide which perceptions belong in which bundle. So pointing out the omission does not, for example, support the circularity objection. On the objection that Hume has failed to provide an analysis of personal identity it cannot be objected that the theory involves circularity. There simply is no theory.

The suggestion that Hume should have provided necessary and sufficient conditions for the identity of persons over time raises serious questions. One concerns how to carry out such an analysis. It seems natural to expect such an analysis to be a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for identity over time, where perceptions and their relations are prominent in these conditions. This seems natural because an analysis of personal identity requires that the analysans be conceptually more basic than persons, and perceptions and their relations fit the bill. A Humean analysis of personal identity should provide necessary and sufficient conditions for personal identity in terms of perceptions and their relations.

Is the task of providing an analysis of personal identity compatible with Hume's philosophical approach? I will argue that the demand for a Humean analysis of personal identity can only be met by transforming Hume's framework into something quite un-Humean. I argue that to point out the inability of Hume's philosophy to provide an analysis of personal identity is not to offer a serious objection.

If perceptions are to be the building blocks in an Humean analysis of personal identity and the relations between perceptions the glue that binds perceptions into persons, then we can't say in advance of the analysis what relations hold between perceptions. For example, Hume's principle that there is an antecedent simple impression for every simple idea cannot take precedence over the principles invoked by the analysis. Hume's principle that there is an antecedent simple impression for every simple idea is implicitly restricted to single minds. My having a simple idea of red entails that *I* had the simple impression of red. For purposes of the proposed analysis, however, perceptions are completely independent from one another. No prior bundling can be assumed. The only constraints on the analysis of personal identity are those having to do with our notion of a person. To request an analysis of personal identity from Hume is thus to require that certain basic principles be suspended, such as the

priority of simple impressions to simple ideas.

This is a serious move. Without the theory of impressions and ideas, Hume does not have the machinery to refute alternative analyses, much less to construct his own. Consider the view that sameness of immaterial substance is necessary and sufficient for personal identity. How could Hume refute this, if he is not allowed his theory of impressions and ideas? Hume could not, as he does, appeal to the fact that we have no impression of substance as evidence against the view, because it is only an empirical fact that we need antecedent impressions for our ideas. (T232-3)

It was suggested that a Humean analysis of personal identity in terms of perceptions and their relations could be spelled out. Suppose that causal relations are crucial to the suggested Humean analysis. On Hume's view, one must begin to understand causation by looking for some "primary impression, from which it arises." (T75) Observation yields no primary impression, and so causation must be understood in some other way, as "deriv'd from some relation among objects." (T75) Thus Hume's view that causation is derived from a relation among objects results from invoking the principle that there is an antecedent simple impression for every simple idea. As we have seen, this principle implicitly bundles perceptions into selves. Thus an analysis of personal identity cannot use the Humean notion of cause, since the direction Hume's analysis of causation takes is in part the result employing principles which presuppose a prior bundling.

Hume does, of course, provide an analysis of causation. But that analysis proceeds in part by reasoning according to Hume's empirical principles. If we reject the principles because they contain empirical claims about which perceptions belong to which selves, then we cannot accept Hume's analysis of causation, which depends on them. Without Hume's analysis of causation, we are in no position to say how Hume would have given a causal analysis of personal identity.

A "Humean" analysis of personal identity cannot be provided if one strips Hume's philosophy of its empirical assumptions. Perhaps this is all the circularity objection amounts to. However, this observation hardly seems compelling as a criticism of Hume. Hume thought that the science of human nature was largely informed by the observation of human nature. What cannot be accomplished within the framework of that science is not within the domain of Hume's enquiries.

IV. CONCLUSION

Two interpretive paths are open to those concerned with Hume's remarks on personal identity in the *Appendix*. One is to try to pinpoint exactly what Hume took to be defective in his own account. The other is to take Hume's expression of concern as evidence of a difficulty, and then try to locate it, without worrying about whether the discovered problem

coincides with what troubled Hume. I have tried to show that in following either of these paths, it is important to get clear on what Hume meant when he said that our perceptions are independent. When we are clear about this, the question of ownership, and with it the circularity problem, vanish.

To defuse the circularity objection, as I hope to have done, is not merely to have discarded one of many possible problems with Hume's theory of personal identity. The circularity objection depends on a particular conception Hume's project, the conception which has Hume taking free-floating perceptions into selves via his associative relations. Seeing that Hume does not conceive of perceptions as causally independent of one another blocks the circularity objection as an account of Hume's self-doubts in the *Appendix*. Seeing that taking perceptions to be causally independent is at odds with Hume's most basic principles blocks our seeing it as the problem, independently of what worried Hume in the *Appendix*. The result frees us to consider what Hume's project was, and then to set out anew on either of the two interpretive path.¹⁴

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NOTES

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford, 1888), p. 635, hereafter "T".

2. Several commentators have taken Hume to be primarily concerned with the ownership of perceptions. Cf. for example, D. F. Pears, "Hume's Account of Personal Identity" in *Questions in the Philosophy of Mind* (London, 1975), pp. 203-223; W. L. Robison, "In Defense of Hume's Appendix", in *McGill Hume Studies*, ed. by D. F. Norton, N. Capaldi, and W. L. Robison (San Diego, 1979), pp. 89-99, and recently, Don Garrett, "Hume's Self-Doubts about Personal Identity," *Philosophical Review*, vol. 90 (1981), pp. 337-358.

3. The circularity objection was first formulated in an unpublished paper by H. P. Grice and John Haugeland entitled "Hume on Personal Identity." The problem has been suggested in print by Barry Stroud, *Hume* (London, 1977), pp. 118-140. Stroud has reservations about endorsing the circularity objection, but he ultimately sees Hume's problem in terms of ownership.

4. David Hume, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1975), pp. 14-16, and *Treatise*, pp. xvi-xix.

5. That this use continues through T207 is clear from the bottom of T207, where Hume says that the names "object" and "perception" stand for the same thing.

6. For example, cf. Stroud, *op. cit.*, pp. 120ff., Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes* (Oxford, 1971), pp. 348 ff., and John Bricke, *Hume's Philosophy of Mind* (Princeton, 1980), p. 70.

7. In a famous passage Hume allows an exception to this, the missing shade of blue, but

he does not feel that the exception threatens his general principle. Cf. T5-6.

8. When we conceive an idea alone, for example, this does not mean that we conceive of it as not having an antecedent impression. As we will see, we can do that as well.

9. Dialogues on Metaphysics and on Religion, in *The Philosophy of the 16th and 17th Centuries*, ed. by Richard H. Popkin (New York, 1966), p. 281 ff.

10. Cf. E. C. Mossner, *The Life of David Hume* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 102, 104. Mossner quotes a letter from Hume to Michael Ramsey in which Hume advises Ramsey to read Malebranche, among others, as preparation for reading the *Treatise*. Cf. also Peter Jones, *Hume's Sentiments* (Edinburgh, 1982), pp. 19-28.

11. Ideas are causally dependent on our impressions, for example. But our impressions are "original existences," and Hume does not speculate about their causes.

12. The discussion of metaphysical independence has been limited to its employment in Hume's arguments against substance, but it can be generalized in ways which can only be briefly mentioned here. We can imagine someone having died immediately after birth, and thus having had only one, metaphysically independent, perception. We can also imagine perceptions which we would not have had, were the world different from the way in which it in fact is. None of these counterfactual situations call Hume's view of the causal dependence of our perceptions into question.

13. Further support for the claim that Hume was not concerned about ownership comes from passages where it would be appropriate for Hume to confront all the perceptions that there are, his own, and the perceptions of all other persons. In such passages Hume is careful to avoid claiming that we have direct access to perceptions other than our own. Cf. T108 ff. and T242 ff.

14. In writing this paper I have benefited from the comments and suggestions of Annette Baier, Donald Baxter, John Haugeland, Geoffrey Sayre McCord, and an anonymous reader for *History of Philosophy Quarterly*.