

ON HUME'S LABYRINTH

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Abstract: *In the appendix to his Treatise Hume admits that his philosophy of mind is defective. Reluctantly he asserts that his thought has ensnared him in a labyrinth. Referring specifically to the section in the Treatise on personal identity and the self, the young Scot admits that he is “involv’d in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent.” (Treatise 633) My paper is a critical investigation of this characterization of Hume’s predicament. I argue (1) that at best Hume is facing a dilemma, not a labyrinth, and (2) that the dilemma can be solved, and (3) that the resolution to Hume’s problem can be found in his conception of intelligibility.*

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There are yet many original things in this new treatise. (*Nouvelle bibliothèque* 1739)

Philosophers are reluctant to admit their mistakes. And when these infrequent admissions are made, they are invariably accompanied by qualifications, excuses and explanations that are designed to mitigate the errors. What makes David Hume’s appendix to his *Treatise of Human Nature* an especially rare contribution to philosophical literature is not only his candid admission of failure but his willingness to face up to the shortcomings - there are no mitigating qualifications to ‘explain away’ his errors. As he bluntly puts it, referring specifically to the section in the *Treatise* on personal identity and the self, “I find myself involv’d in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent.” (*Treatise* 633) The bold optimism that characterizes the opening bars of the *Treatise* is now a faint memory, overshadowed by the somber reflections of a distressed virtuoso, his analyses reduced to a set of inconsistencies and errors that threaten to undermine his contribution to a pragmatic, empirical science of human nature. Hume had promised us in his introduction to the *Treatise* that his views would constitute a “science, which will not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in utility to any other of human comprehension.” (*Treatise* *xix*) The flaws that Hume unearths at the end of his *magnum opus* thus pose a serious threat to his ambitious enterprise and clearly unsettle him:

I must...confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding.
I pretend not, however, to pronounce it insuperable. Others, perhaps,

or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions. (*Treatise* 636)

So what are these discordant errors? Precisely what are these opinions that Hume views in the appendix as inconsistent and incomprehensible? And how did they arise? This paper is an attempt to answer these vital questions. If we can determine the nature of these contentious positions we will be able to better understand why Hume regards them as inconsistencies, ill suited for his practical, empirical science of human nature.¹ But before we consider these alleged flaws in Hume's account of the self an important preliminary issue needs to be addressed: how significant are these faults? Or to be more precise, what is *Hume's* assessment of his errors?

In the opening paragraph of the appendix Hume makes it clear that there is a serious problem with a central section of his *Treatise* contribution on human nature. Without saying explicitly which component it is, Hume warns his readers that one part of his analysis proves intractable:

I have not yet been so fortunate as to discover any very considerable mistakes in the reasonings deliver'd in the preceding volumes, *except on one article...*(Appendix to the *Treatise* 623, my emphasis)

This might be regarded as a reassuring note by Hume's readers. Apparently, what mistakes there might be in the *Treatise* have by and large not been shown to be of any consequence by the time of the creation of the appendix, as far as Hume is concerned. But the analysis in one of the sections, unfortunately, has a few "very considerable mistakes." As he sees it, there are serious errors in his proposals in "one article." Which section of the text is Hume alluding to, one wonders?

While he is not forthcoming on this important issue in the opening paragraphs of the appendix, given what he says later, there can be little doubt that this "one article" that is regarded by Hume as being seriously deficient is the section on personal identity, with the controversial account of the self. I suspect that it is this component of the main text that contains the thorny set of issues that so bedevils Hume. This suggestion of mine seems to be confirmed by the strong terminology that he uses later in the appendix when describing the problems associated with his account of personal identity and the self. For this is the section of the *Treatise* - according to his later remarks in the appendix - that Hume views as containing egregious mistakes that are so serious that he ultimately concedes that his account is incoherent. As he dejectedly puts it at the end of his appendix reflections on his account of the self, his views rely on "two principles, which I cannot render consistent: nor is it in my power to renounce either of them." (*Treatise* 636) This suggests that the mistakes with his account of the self are not regarded by Hume as trivial but as serious and substantial – errors that will prove to be a serious challenge to correct.

Nevertheless, as fundamental and substantial as the errors in this account of the self might appear to be to its author, Hume is not prepared to concede defeat. Well, not yet. These defects in his views are to be regarded as mere temporary obstacles: "I pretend not, however,

¹ When Hume wrote in his introduction that the contribution he was about to make to science would hopefully "not be inferior in certainty, and will be much superior in *utility* to any other of human comprehension," he was reinforcing a sentiment expressed earlier in his subtitle to the *Treatise*. His work on human nature was to be seen as an "attempt to introduce the *experimental* method of reasoning into moral subjects." (*Treatise* Introduction and xix, my emphases)

to pronounce it absolutely insuperable.” (*Treatise* 636) As he sees it, there is a distinct possibility that the fundamental defects with his account of the self will be corrected in the future. It seems that for Hume, no special expertise is necessary to resolve the problem of the incompatibility of his two principles. For the individuals who are interested in this problem need not be especially familiar with, let alone supportive of the underlying philosophy that gives life to the problem. In a somewhat cavalier manner Hume implies that the solution to the problem that he has unearthed lies within reach of any researchers who might be interested in his thought on the self. Complete outsiders may well succeed in solving the problem even though Hume, who is intimately familiar with it, its background and its foundation, has failed. For that matter, Hume himself, given more time to consider the issues might unearth the solution. For all these reasons the account of the self in the *Treatise*, as troubled as it might appear to be, ought not to be rejected. From his vantage point, while the situation may seem to be bleak there is still room for optimism:

Others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover some hypothesis, that will reconcile those contradictions.
(*Treatise* 636)

The shortcomings with the views on the self in the *Treatise* are thus regarded by Hume as challenging *contingent* aberrations, in need of more sustained treatment from interested scholars. But what precisely are the flaws that are endemic to this account of the self?

Section One: The appendix and the errors in Hume’s account of the self

Unfortunately for us, *Hume’s* diagnosis of the errors that underlie his account of the self is unclear. This lack of clarity is due, to a large extent, to the nature of the issues encompassed by Hume’s treatment. But Hume’s analysis, as I will show, is also to blame due in large measure to the vacillation in his characterization of the problem. Nevertheless, if we are to gain a secure grasp of his controversial account of the self in the main body of the *Treatise* it will be necessary for us to understand his appendix assessment of its shortcomings. This is certainly not a straightforward task, as some commentators have pointed out.² So we need to tread slowly.

On three separate occasions in the appendix Hume presents us with his critical understanding of the relationship between two of the major components of his account of the self. Each set of remarks draws attention to what he regards as the *logical* relationship between these components. In the opening paragraph on his problem with his account of the self Hume despairingly informs his readers that he is ensnared in a labyrinth that contains contradictory elements from which he is unable to extricate himself:

I find myself involv’d in such a labyrinth, that, I must confess, I neither know how to correct my former opinions, *nor how to render them consistent.* (*Treatise* 633, my emphasis)

² Some commentators have suggested that the prospects for comprehending Hume’s moves here are bleak. For instance, Justin Brookes asserts that Hume is confused and that his appendix is opaque:

In an appendix, he admits to feeling confused about his account of personal identity, though for reasons few readers find clear. (From *The Philosophers*, edited T. Honderich 109)

My analysis of Hume’s assessment of the problems endemic to his views on the self might throw a little light on this shortcoming in the appendix.

Later he maintains that his opinions on the self contain inconsistent components: “In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render *consistent*...” (*Treatise* 636, my emphasis) Finally, in the very same paragraph where he talks about the lack of consistency between his two principles, he tells us that he hopes that others, or perhaps even he, “may discover some hypothesis, *that will reconcile those contradictions*”. (*Treatise* 636, my emphasis)³ All of which suggests that Hume views two of the central theses that he relies on to support his account of the self as logically incompatible. This lends credence to the view that Hume’s assessment of the problems with his account of the self entails that two of the major pillars supporting this account are deemed to be mutually exclusive. If so, the failure to correct this logical defect could prove fatal for the ambitious philosophy of mind that Hume is striving to establish.

Now these proposals on the intractability of his problem encourage Hume to present his problem in what he clearly views as a bleak light. As we have seen above, Hume suggests that he is trapped in a labyrinth. What is more, the labyrinth that his views on the self have seduced him into is regarded as especially problematic, for Hume acknowledges that he neither knows how to correct his views, “nor how to render them consistent”. Clearly there are labyrinths and there are labyrinths. As Hume understands his situation, the labyrinth that he has worked himself into is one of the more challenging predicaments that scholars can walk into. This suggests that the problem facing him is viewed by Hume as particularly serious, and possibly intractable. So it comes as a surprise to find Hume later altering his assessment of his prospects for solving the problem that he has identified with his account of the self. For it seems that the problem, from Hume’s point of view, is actually not as difficult to solve as he initially lead us to believe it is. As unpleasant as the labyrinth might be Hume proposes that there is a way out of the morass. While labyrinths or mazes often consist of a myriad of misleading possibilities, each one of which is attractive, thus overwhelming the poor traveler, the problem that has ensnared Hume is less benign. When we learn more about Hume’s appendix understanding of his predicament where his account of the self is concerned, it transpires that he actually has a fairly well defined understanding of the problems that beset his account. His confusion, it seems, is not as pronounced as he initially let on. And his views on the nature of his problems, for the most part, prescribe the possible solutions as well. Furthermore, the range of likely solutions, as we shall see below, is not as extensive or bewildering as one might have been lead to believe with the earlier characterization of the problem. So Hume, apparently, is not as flummoxed as some of his early comments on the problem associated with his account of the self might intimate. What accounts for this less pessimistic understanding of his problem? And how do we account for the transition in his mood? Take the first question.

Hume’s assessment of the problem that underlies his account of the self in the *Treatise* undergoes a substantial shift in the appendix. While he initially he suggests that he is ensnared in a *labyrinth*, but within the space of three pages this characterization of his predicament shifts substantially. For he now views the problem as a little more manageable, implicitly depicting the issue as a *dilemma*. As desperate as the situation might initially appear

³ Hume uses logical terminology extensively in his appendix. In the four pages of the appendix devoted to a consideration of the account of the self from the section on personal identity Hume relies on three logical terms and their cognates quite extensively. The term ‘contradiction’ is used five times, the term ‘consistent’ is used three times, and the term ‘absurd’ (used in a logical sense as synonymous to ‘contradiction’) is used three times.

to be, it turns out that it is not as challenging as originally suggested. All, apparently, is not lost. Towards the end of the appendix section devoted to his assessment of his views on personal identity and the self Hume proposes that as a result of his serpentine views on the self he at least does face a *limited* range of options that individually might solve the problem. On the surface each one of these options appears to be attractive. Unfortunately, as attractive as they are when considered in isolation, these potential solutions happen to be incompatible, concedes Hume:

In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them..." (*Treatise* 636)

This marks an important transition in his thought. Rather than the previous depiction of the problem as a perplexing labyrinth, with its intimidating sense of confusion and bewilderment, Hume now proposes that he is actually faced with a fairly well defined problem: namely, a dilemma with its two incompatible "principles".

How does Hume account for this 'improvement' in the prospects for his views on the self? As it happens, he is silent on the issue in the appendix. This is unfortunate, as the terminology that Hume uses suggests that the predicament is not as serious as originally thought. The initial exasperation with the defects becomes somewhat muted as he explores the details of his arguments. The shift might be explained by the fact that in the appendix he immerses himself in the specifics of the arguments of the main text in the *Treatise* rather than dwell on his more general and vague reservations with the text. With this reorientation in his focus it is understandable that the gloom that accompanies the earlier *broad* remarks on the difficulties with his account of the self is subsequently replaced by a set of more considered *detailed* reflections on his arguments. In returning to these more innovative components of his account of the self – arguments and proposals that Hume is clearly proud of - Hume might be encouraged to be less pessimistic about the problems than his initial language suggested he was. Of course, this alteration in his mood might be ephemeral and misleading. On the other hand, his remarks at the end of this section in the appendix may well more accurately reflect his true assessment of the prospects for solving his problems with his account of the self. So perhaps Hume's more nuanced optimism at the end of the section in the appendix on this nagging issue is not misplaced: the problem is actually not as bewildering as initially thought and the potential solutions happen to be fairly well defined and understood.

The reflections above now raise a central question for Hume: how are the central components of his account to be reconciled, or made consistent? That is to say, *if* the situation is a little brighter, as a matter of fact, than originally envisaged and Hume is actually facing a dilemma that consists of seductive horns that are not individually easy to resist, we need to know precisely how he intends to escape from his predicament. Fortunately for us, he does suggest some tentative proposals on how to resolve the dilemma. But these suggestions call for some creative interpretation.

While Hume does not articulate the method that he proposes needs to be followed in order to solve the problem of the logical incompatibility of two of the major components of his account of the self, he at least does point at a plausible resolution. But what we are given are little more than vague hints that can help us understand his own *modus operandi*. We need to consider these hints in some detail because they are pregnant with fruitful suggestions. For the moment let us assume that Hume is correct about his characterization of the predicament that he is in with his account of the self and accept that there is a genuine inconsistency between the two components that he is concerned about. One method to resolve his problem is to refute at least one of the contradictory components. Of course, if this strategy

fails there are other avenues open to the investigator of Hume's account of the self. One alternative course of action open to us would be to reconcile the conflict i.e. perhaps to either show that the two components are not dissimilar or contradictory, or to find a third thesis that enables us to show that the two components are at least logically compatible.⁴ So, what does Hume do? As we shall see, Hume's appendix analysis of his reasoning in the *Treatise* implies that attempts to refute either of the two problematic components of his account of the self are likely to fail, and that the conundrum that he has "discovered" proves difficult, if not impossible to circumvent. As he dejectedly declares towards the end of his appendix assessment of his views on the self, these "are two principles, which *I* cannot render consistent." (*Treatise* 636, my emphasis) But is Hume's despair warranted? Is the conundrum as intractable as he suggests it is? Consider the details of his discussion on these issues in the appendix.

Section Two: On Hume's Labyrinth

In the appendix Hume makes it clear that as far as he is concerned, each of the (alleged) inconsistent components of his account of the self appears to be true and difficult, if not impossible to resist. Well, to be a little more accurate, both of these two appealing positions appear to have what Hume views as strong evidence in their favor. As he sees it, *both* components of his view on the self appear to be supported by evidence. However, as we shall see, the caches of evidence that Hume alludes to in the appendix for each of these components are not of equal merit. This outcome raises a number of fascinating questions, some of which I intend to explore below.

In the appendix Hume outlines a number of arguments that he views as collectively constituting good reasons for ultimately adopting his account of the self. The thesis that we are "nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions" apparently rests on a set of supporting arguments that he suggests are persuasive. (*Treatise* 252) As provocative as his view might be, the alternative negative thesis that there is no perfectly identical and simple self appears to be confirmed by the arguments, or as he puts it, the evidence. Or so Hume maintains in the appendix. After outlining the premises that form the basis of his overall argument for this bold negative thesis, Hume concludes with the following summation: "So far I seem to be attended with *sufficient* evidence." (*Treatise* 635, my emphasis) Notice that he is not suggesting that the evidence is conclusive – it is merely adequate to satisfy him. Perhaps more evidence could be mustered to support this negative thesis, but as far as he is concerned he has done enough to satisfy himself on this score.

Ignore for the moment the obvious rejoinder to this conclusion that Hume, as the proud author of this provocative negative thesis on the self is unlikely to work hard at uncovering countervailing evidence (or arguments) to refute his thesis. Hume is surely not the best candidate for assessing his own arguments for his bold thesis on the self. And ignore the even larger issue on the adequacy of any evidence to establish the truth of a theory, rather than its falsity. These critical comments notwithstanding, for the moment grant Hume his first horn: let us view his assessment of his bold negative thesis on the self as convincing. This component of the dilemma that bothers Hume has much going for it, and for all intents and purposes can be viewed as probably true, perhaps even highly probable. What are we to make of his assessment of the second component of his account of the self i.e. the alleged second

⁴ Are other courses of action open to Hume? Yes, but this is not important here. What matters are Hume's appendix views on the labyrinth and *his* proposals for dealing with it.

horn of the dilemma? Are his critical reflections on his account of perceptions and our feelings that accompany those perceptions convincing?

Hume's reflections on this second component of his dilemma are less perspicuous than those he outlined on the first. His view on the interrelationships or connections between the perceptions responsible for his idea of the self, and his specific proposal on the role of emotions in determining this relationship are thought to possess merit. Well, as far as Hume is concerned. As counter-intuitive as this component of the *Treatise* account of the self might initially appear to be, we are entreated to accept this position as plausible, if not true. Expressing his views on the truth-value of his thesis on perceptions somewhat cryptically, Hume reassures us that "however extraordinary this conclusion may seem, *it need not surprize us.*" (*Treatise* 635, my emphasis) We should not be taken aback by his counterintuitive view on perceptions because it apparently coheres with the (true?) views endorsed by the authorities in the field. As Hume sees it, we ought to accede to this component of his view on the self because it is consistent with the received view on consciousness that is currently endorsed by the majority of philosophers writing on this issue:

Most philosophers seem inclin'd to think, that personal identity arises from consciousness; and consciousness is nothing but a reflected thought or perception. The present philosophy, therefore, has so far a *promising aspect.* (*Treatise* 635, my emphasis)

In the appendix Hume provides us with no additional reasons to subscribe to this component of his account of the self. This is it! The support for his thesis on the connections of his perceptions responsible for his idea of the self in the end appears to be little more than the circumstantial evidence adduced from the popularity of various philosophical views on consciousness.

Hume is clearly uneasy with this particular outcome of his analysis. This discomfort is expressed twice in the appendix, in different ways. In the first place, Hume is quick to admit that his account is defective:

I am sensible, that my account [of the connections of perceptions] is very defective, and that nothing but the seeming evidence of the precedent reasoning cou'd have induc'd me to receive it. (*Treatise* 635, my insert)

Not possessing new, independent evidence or arguments for his view, Hume suggests that he will need to rely on the earlier reasons for the negative thesis on the self to support this different thesis on perceptions. Of course, this is not a logical defect in his case – one batch of premises can logically support many different conclusions. But Hume clearly wants to go further and explore new territory with this second component of his views on the self, perhaps in the process extending our understanding of human nature. So the failure to unearth new evidence for his bold philosophy of the mind comes as a major disappointment to him.

There is a second, and arguably, more telling reason why Hume is dissatisfied with his discussion of the second component of his account of the self. He decries the fact that he has not found a satisfactory theory to explain precisely how discrete perceptions connect. As exciting and as novel as his negative thesis of the self is, his account will remain incomplete - and will therefore be unconvincing - unless it includes some theoretical speculation on the interconnections of our perceptions. Hume's disappointment is palpable:

All my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness. *I cannot*

discover any theory, which gives me satisfaction on this head.

(*Treatise* 636, my emphasis)

Incomplete accounts cannot be regarded as true, no matter how promising they appear to be. Even if the *Treatise* opinions on the connections between the perceptions responsible for the idea of the self are ‘endorsed’ by the majority of philosophers interested in this issue, and even if these philosophical opinions are heartily promoted by their author, they still cannot be viewed as true. More needs to be done to determine their truth. As Hume sees it, a theory still needs to be found to explain in detail how perceptions interconnect. But this theory proves to be elusive. With one of its major components in need of confirmation Hume’s overall account of the self must therefore be viewed as incomplete and possibly as seriously defective. Not only does it contain apparently incompatible components, but one of these major constituents still needs to be shown to be true. All of which helps explain Hume’s exasperated outburst that his situation appears to be hopeless.

The signs of frustration from Hume might strike one as surprising. His remarks come at the end of a paragraph in which he enthusiastically reminds his readers about his references in the *Treatise* to the feelings that accompany our discrete perceptions when our idea of the self forms. This is a component of his innovative account of the self that Hume is clearly proud of: “The present philosophy...has so far a promising aspect.” (*Treatise* 635) What makes it promising, apparently, is its novelty and most importantly, its compatibility with the widespread references to consciousness in the scientific community. An act of consciousness, as he sees it, is little more than an act of perception: “...consciousness is nothing but a reflected thought or perception.” (*Treatise* 635) But perceptions need to be anchored in feelings, at least where those responsible for the idea of the self are concerned. So his references to feelings ought not to surprise his readers, and might even meet with their approval. Even if his emphasis on emotions departs, to some extent, from those of his colleagues – for they have presumably underrated the centrality of these emotions, if not overlooked them entirely in their philosophy of mind – Hume can take comfort in knowing that his account of the self has not gone too far in this respect. In drawing attention to these emotions, and in placing them center-stage in his account of the self, Hume is working with phenomena that others in the scientific community are already familiar with - even if their emphasis on consciousness differs from his on feelings. Yet Hume remains despondent in his assessment of his account of perceptions. Why?

The answer can be found, I suggest in his comments above on the need to find a *theory* to account for the connections between his perceptions. It is clear that Hume is after a detailed scientific explanation on the nature and role of these emotions or feelings. He wants a deeper, more substantial or complete theory to explain what is happening when the idea of the self forms – a theory that accounts for the interconnections between our perceptions that are associated with our idea of the self. Unfortunately, Hume has not found the missing theory. Simply *referring* to these feelings in his reflections on the self does not satisfy him, as novel and exciting as this component of his account of the self might happen to be. Stressing that connections in general are elusive, for “no connexions among distinct existences are ever discoverable by human understanding”, Hume reluctantly concedes that without the requisite theory on the emotions he has failed his readers. (*Treatise* 635) In his philosophy of the mind one must therefore be satisfied with mere superficial references to ephemeral emotional feelings when we entertain the thought that there is a connection between various perceptions associated with our idea of the self:

We only *feel* a connexion or a determination of the thought, to pass from one object to another. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind... (*Treatise* 635, Hume's emphasis)

It is one thing to point to their role in the formation of the idea of the self, and clearly quite another to explain in detail precisely how these feelings relate one set of perceptions to another. All of which suggests, as I see it, that the reference to feelings is merely an opening gambit, as it were, in Hume's bold account of the self. He is pointing us in this direction for an answer to his enquiry into the source of the idea of the self, but unfortunately is unable to go any further down this path himself. As far as he is concerned, this is where *we* need to go in our attempts to understand human nature, but far more needs to be done to complete this component of his innovative account of the self. Without this theory, intimates Hume, not only is his account of the relationship between perceptions wanting, his broader account of the self must also be viewed as unsatisfactory.

Where does this leave Hume? Unlike the first (negative) component of his account of the self with its independent evidence that he proclaimed as "sufficient evidence," we now see that the second set of Hume's opinions – as far as he is concerned - rests on nothing more substantial than the possibly discordant opinions of many of the philosophical authorities around him. This component is incomplete, lacking the support of a necessary theory, in Hume's view. To suggest that it is true would be to go too far – hence Hume's willingness to talk about the component in oblique terms: it has a "promising aspect" and "it need not surprize us". (*Treatise* 636) *It is important to note that he never claims that this view is true.* This would be to go far beyond the flimsy evidence that Hume has found for the views on perception that he proposes. The so-called "support" of the wider philosophical community will have to do. This outcome must surely be unnerving for Hume.

Given Hume's willingness in general to challenge and refute the opinions of his philosophical rivals on so many issues it comes as a surprise to find him casting his lot with them on this, one of his most original and provocative positions. Could Hume not muster stronger evidence for his thesis on perceptions and feelings? For it is a substantial component of his bold views on the self. Even if the position that he is articulating on perceptions and the role of feelings can be described as possessing "a promising aspect", it certainly does not follow that it ought to be regarded as true. Perhaps we ought not to even take it seriously, as the best that its author can do is merely align this view with the opinions of his rivals. So why does Hume insist on the plausibility of this component of his account of the self? Even if we overlook Hume's fallacious appeal here to the authority of the philosophers with their emphasis on consciousness and ignore his (questionable) equivocation of consciousness and feeling, what substantial reasons are there for accepting this component of Hume's account of the self? As attractive as it might appear to be, it still remains to be seen precisely how the acknowledgement of the prospects or potential of his view on perceptions and feelings establishes that this view *is* promising, let alone true. Hume's view on perceptions might be pregnant with suggestions, but he still needs to show that it is true. And he is aware of this requirement.

So *both* of the major components of his view on the self face a number of challenging issues: the negative thesis on the self has at best merely "sufficient evidence," and Hume's views on the interconnections between his perceptions responsible for his idea of the self are incomplete. Nevertheless, as Hume sees it, these are problems that do not diminish the overall appeal of the foundation for his provocative philosophy of mind. When all is said and done he

still finds that the basis for his account of the self is difficult, if not impossible to resist. Even with their problems, the individual components of this constituent of his account of the self ought to be relied on as useful insights into a set of vexing problems, suggests Hume. And if they are attractive foundational components, even with their warts, the overall account of the self in the *Treatise* ought to be seen for what it is: namely, as a useful framework that is equally difficult to resist.

When Hume presents us with his predicament in the appendix he does so on the understanding that he has established that the second major component of his account of the self *is* true, and therefore responsible for the labyrinth that he suggests he is in:

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.* (*Treatise* 636, Hume's emphasis)

But if the second principle is not true – or perhaps is not as convincing as the first principle, by virtue of the absent theory – the predicament surely does not exist. There can be no inconsistency between two propositions, when one of the propositions is true and the other only partially true.⁵ The labyrinth - or dilemma, as I have been calling it - does not exist if any one of the central supports of his account of the self is indeterminate. More pointedly, Hume's dilemma disappears if the second component of his account of the self can be shown not to be true.⁶ Now he *does* acknowledge that the second component of his account of the self is incomplete. So Hume is precluded from claiming that it is true. And this he does not do, as I have pointed out. So why does Hume persist with his claim that he is faced with a labyrinth? For the natural course of action, surely, would have been to characterize his predicament in less dramatic terms.

References to a labyrinth add drama and urgency to his analysis. Hume is proud of his account of the self – in spite of, or even perhaps because of its contentiousness. So the specter of a scholar searching for the truth while ensnared in a beguiling labyrinth of his own making certainly adds interest, if not poignancy, to the discussion. More importantly, the references to the labyrinth in the appendix graphically illustrate Hume's understanding of the problems facing *any* scholar attempting to construct a useful account of the self, let alone a broader workable theory of human nature. The labyrinth clearly serves a useful purpose in Hume's analysis, both stylistically and philosophically. Hence his reluctance to merely draw attention to the problems in his account of the self: he wants to couch these problems in as dramatic a form as possible. But has he overreached himself here? Is his predicament as problematic as he proclaims it is? Perhaps not.

I have already outlined a number of reasons for suggesting that Hume does not face a labyrinth. For the most part, these reasons have to do with the standing of the evidence for the

⁵ This entails a concession that is generous: that the first component of Hume's account of the self is true. Even *Hume* does not go this far in the appendix, as we have seen above. For he maintains that he has merely "sufficient evidence" for the component. So on Hume's analysis the labyrinth or dilemma rests on *partially* true components. But this might be to stretch the notion of a labyrinth or dilemma too far.

⁶ This is *not* necessarily to presume that we need to show that it is false. Of course, the falsification of this component would completely undermine the standing of the dilemma. But we need not go that far. If we can establish that the component is at best only *partially* true the dilemma still disappears.

two components central to his account of the self, especially the support proffered for the second component. However, there is arguably a more serious set of issues ahead for Hume's claim that he has to wrestle with a labyrinth in his analysis of the self. Throughout the discussion we have operated on the assumption that Hume's characterization of the relationship between the two components is correct: that is to say, we have taken his remarks about an incompatibility between the two major components of his view at face value. The time has come for us to reconsider Hume's assessment of the relationship between these two components. For the situation is a little more complex than Hume's analysis lets on.

Section Three: Revisiting the incompatibility of the two principles

Throughout the appendix Hume vociferously proclaims that his account of the self in the *Treatise* is fundamentally flawed, founded as it appears to be on two inconsistent components of his view. These two theses, however, prove to be seductive, dragging Hume into a labyrinth that he finds difficult, if not impossible to escape. But is Hume's predicament as hopeless as he suggests it is? Perhaps not. I think that there is far more to his situation than he explicitly recognizes. When these additional issues are taken into account it becomes clear that Hume is overreaching when he boldly maintains that he is trapped in a labyrinth with inconsistent components. On the one hand, his logical predicament can be shown to be non-existent. On the other hand, even if we grant Hume his bleak diagnosis, there are provocative fundamental assumptions in his analysis that need to be explored that threaten to undermine his assessment, if not his overall account of the self. In short, as I shall argue below, Hume's critical reflections on his account of the self in the appendix rest on intriguing issues, the consideration of which will expose more serious fault-lines in his view. I shall outline these problems that have not been articulated in the appendix and show that they add a new dimension to Hume's reservations about his account of the self. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's begin with Hume's initial statement of his predicament and take it from there. We need to reconsider Hume's characterization of the principles that allegedly give rise to the labyrinth.

At the end of the appendix Hume provides us with a summation of his predicament that contains the most forthright expression of the principles and their interconnections:

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.* (*Treatise* 636, Hume's emphasis)

The seductive principles that constitute the basis of the conundrum that bewitches Hume need to be isolated from the compound statement above for closer scrutiny:

- a) **Proposition One:** All our distinct perceptions are distinct existences.
- b) **Proposition Two:** The mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.

Now Hume wants us to accept that these two propositions are inconsistent principles: as he says, these are "principles, which I cannot render consistent". This is a puzzling remark. One obvious rejoinder to Hume is to point out that the two propositions are different, and at least on the face of it, appear quite compatible. The first principle is about perceptions, while the second is on the mind and its capabilities. That is to say, the content of propositions one

and two differ.⁷ There does not appear to be a contradiction here. It's not as though one proposition asserts what the other denies – the classic contradiction, or inconsistency. To put it more formally, Hume's reasoning here appears to be invalid. Let the first proposition be represented by 'A' and the second by 'B'. We can show formally that the adoption of these *different* propositions cannot entail a contradiction:

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

This reasoning is invalid as it stands.⁸ Yet Hume insists that the two propositions are inconsistent. Adopting the principle of charity, let us take a closer look at the propositions to determine if there is not more to them than meets the eye. Perhaps this representation of the principles in the schematic above is inadequate. To better understand the principles and to hopefully gain some understanding of his logical assessment, we need to analyze the propositions in detail. Let us begin with the obscure phrase, 'distinct existences' that features prominently in both propositions. How does Hume read this phrase?

Hume has provided us with two brief explanations of the term 'distinct' in the appendix. The first account is a broad explanation of the word, while the second is a more specific application of the term in a down-to-earth example. To begin, take the more obscure general explanation of the term. As he uses the word, whatever is distinct can be

⁷ There is a possibility that the disparity between the two principles is not as great as my comments here suggest. As we will learn shortly, Hume's views on the relationship between the two propositions that he alleges are inconsistent are a little more complex than these initial remarks of mine intimate.

⁸ My analysis above might misrepresent Hume's conception of the inconsistency. Hume's assessment in the appendix of the logical relationship between the two principles that are thought to undergird his account of the self might be better depicted differently. The predicament that Hume suggests he is in might be better seen as a problem that involves *four* propositions – two of which are implicit. This alternative characterization of the problem would suggest at least one of the possible courses of action open to him. Let A, B, C and D represent four different propositions. Hume wants us to accept that the reasons he has provided us are sufficient to establish propositions A and B: these are the two principles that he apparently is unable to resist or "renounce", as he puts it. For the moment then assume that they are true. Now Hume maintains that they, unfortunately, are not consistent. But if we can establish that each of the principles that Hume finds irresistible implies an additional principle or thesis the new argument or reasoning can be shown to be valid, *provided that the implied propositions are inconsistent*. Let me illustrate:

1. A
2. B
3. $A \rightarrow C$
4. $B \rightarrow D$
5. $\sim (C \cdot D)$ / $\Delta \sim (A \cdot B)$

This argument is valid. So there appears to be a way out for Hume. Well, at least one outlet seems plausible. In plain English, perhaps Hume's argument that the two principles as they stand are contradictory is invalid. But with some additional (perhaps not unreasonable) premises his initial reasoning can be converted to a valid argument. It would remain for researchers who are interested in 'rescuing' Hume's account of the self to determine what these additional premises are. To do this it would be necessary to take a closer look at his full views on the self in the main section of the *Treatise* and some of its consequences. This is not something that I am at liberty to pursue here.

distinguished, and can therefore also be isolated and selected for attention by the mind. In this case it becomes possible for the mind to think about it:

Whatever is distinct, is distinguishable; and whatever is distinguishable, is separable by the thought or imagination. (*Treatise* 634)

This is unfortunately very vague, but suggests the following, as I read Hume. If an individual is able to develop thoughts about X or is able to creatively imagine what X is like, X is regarded as distinct. Take an example. Suppose that I have the opportunity to briefly visit a few cities in America: say, Denver, San Diego, Chicago, Oregon, San Francisco and Houston. After the trip I reflect on my hectic travels around the States. My memory might be shaky and the thoughts that I have about the cities that I visited might be difficult to untangle. As I understand Hume, no matter how tired I might be, it is always possible for me to think about the city Chicago and to do so in a manner that enables me not to confuse my thoughts on Chicago with those of another city. My thoughts about Chicago, in this case, are regarded as distinct, irrespective of my frame of mind. As Hume might put it, my thoughts about Chicago are, and will always be separable by thought i.e. they can always be distinguished from my other thoughts. My thinking on Chicago can be so specific as to exclude other thoughts I might be able to entertain on any other city, let alone on any other so-called existence. Now, if my thoughts about Chicago can be distinct, what about my perceptions of this city? Can they be distinct as well?

Hume thinks so. As far as he is concerned, “all perceptions are distinct.” (*Treatise* 634) That is to say, it is always possible for someone to think about them, either individually or collectively as a set of specific perceptions. As he puts it, these perceptions “may be conceiv’d as separately existent, and may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity.” (*Treatise* 634) So thoughts and perceptions are distinct for Hume. What about the entities associated with these thoughts and perceptions? Are these existences, as Hume prefers to call them, also distinct? It seems so. Hume appears to extend his views on distinctness to these entities as well. But he does this in an interesting way. He uses an example not only to illustrate his conception of distinctness but also to broaden it to encompass entities or physical objects. The example that he uses in the appendix involves references to a table, chimney and perceptions.

When an individual perceives a chimney or a table, suggests Hume, what we strictly perceive are perceptions – perceptions that can be distinguished or separated from other perceptions: “When I view this table and that chimney, nothing is present to me but particular perceptions...(*Treatise* 634) But these perceptions are similar to each other. As Hume puts it, they “are of a like nature with all the other perceptions.” (*Treatise* 632) Yet we organize these perceptions into different sets in an attempt to make sense of what we perceive. As similar as the perceptions might appear to be – perceptions are perceptions – it is always possible for an individual to classify the perceptions into different sets. But if the individual perceptions are distinct, the resultant concatenation of perceptions must be equally distinct and distinguishable, suggests Hume.⁹ From this it follows that if we classify the collection of (individually distinct) perceptions a, b, and c as entity V, this entity will be regarded as

⁹ Is Hume running afoul of the fallacy of composition? Perhaps. The suggestion that x and y share a common property – namely, distinctness, in this case – does not necessarily entail that the set populated by x and y will equally be distinct.

distinct by virtue of the distinct perceptions that constitute it. For instance, some perceptions might constitute a chimney, another collection a table and so on. The chimney and the table are therefore distinct entities, composed of distinct perceptions. Careful philosophers are inclined to acknowledge this, proposes Hume; “This is the doctrine of philosophers.” (*Treatise* 634) However, there are others who do not subscribe to phenomenalism who, nevertheless, are at liberty to refer in their way to non-perceptual entities, such as chimneys and chairs. These references are successful because the individuals who are referring to their entities are able to distinguish in their thoughts between the various entities of *their* ontologies.

The vulgar, for instance, who do not subscribe to the doctrine of the philosophers, are as entitled to talk about various physical objects as are the philosophers who prefer to refer to their perceptions. And they do so often enough. That the vulgar can do this is testimony to their ability to successfully distinguish between the objects of their ontology. And if they can successfully distinguish between these non-philosophical objects, these entities are also to be regarded as separate or distinct:

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. (*Treatise* 634)

In short, Hume extends the concept of distinctness to physical objects and intimates that thoughts about these existences are as distinguishable as those about perceptions. Thoughts, perceptions and physical objects are all, therefore, deemed to be distinguishable, and as such distinct. In the light of Hume’s conception of *distinct*, this is another way of saying that separate thoughts can form about perceptions, thoughts and even physical objects.

Now references to the physical objects subscribed to by the vulgar can be shown to be logically equivalent to references to the perceptions that the philosophers prefer to refer to. This equivalency arises because the world of the vulgar is intimately connected to that of the philosophers. For Hume maintains that *unless* the references to the entities that populate the ontology of the vulgar can be translated into references to the entities of the philosophers’ ontology – namely, perceptions – the propositions from the vulgar will be meaningless. This is a critical move in Hume’s analysis, the consideration of which might help us better understand his claims about the inconsistent principles.

In the appendix Hume reassures his readers that the philosophers’ world of perceptions is not contradictory. As he puts it, somewhat obliquely, as all perceptions are distinct, they “may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity.” (*Treatise* 634) But the world of the vulgar is equally respectable from a logical point of view:

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. (*Treatise* 634)

So both the philosophers and the vulgar subscribe to consistent ontologies. However, the discourse of the vulgar will remain meaningless unless their expressions can be shown to be co-extensive with those of the philosophers. Only those claims about non-perceptions that can be rewritten as claims about perceptions can be understood:

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

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. Now the second principle that is bothering Hume in the appendix is not explicitly about perceptions: “The mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences.” (*Treatise* 636) Can this proposition be rewritten to comply with the requirements insisted on by Hume for intelligibility? If not, following Hume’s reasoning, it cannot be understood and perhaps equally important for him, cannot be viewed as incompatible with the first principle from the appendix. Propositions that cannot be understood cannot be assigned a truth-value and consequently, cannot be in a logical relationship with another proposition that has a truth-value. So does the second principle satisfy Hume’s criterion for intelligibility? If not, his claim about the inconsistency of the principles is false for even more fundamental reasons than I outlined previously.

As the first principle is about perceptions, it presumably is intelligible. But the second principle appears to pose a problem. This is a proposition ostensibly about minds and real connexions i.e. it does not appear to be about perceptions. Given Hume’s views on the priority of the philosophers’ world of perceptions it must be possible to translate this second proposition into one about perceptions. This requirement, or so it seems, can be met. For the mind, according to the philosopher Hume is nothing but (a set of) perceptions and so-called real connexions happen to be the connections between perceptions:

When I turn my reflexion on *myself*, I never can perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive any thing but the perceptions. ‘Tis the composition of these, therefore, which forms the self. (*Treatise* 634, Hume’s)

With this account of the self, or mind, the second principle, with its references to non-perceptual entities, can be translated into the language of the philosopher. The principle appears to at least satisfy Hume’s conception of intelligibility. So perhaps the two principles are not as dissimilar as originally suggested, for they are presumably both intelligible and about the same content, namely perceptions. To put it more pointedly, the discrepancy between the two principles does not appear to be as pronounced as originally suggested.

Here we have what appears to be the preliminary sketch for a resolution of the dilemma that Hume articulated at the end of his appendix. My analysis above suggests that there is a way to resolve the conflict between the two principles that anchor his account of the self in the *Treatise*: focus on Hume’s conception of intelligibility. While there initially appears to be an intractable conflict between these principles, it becomes apparent that there is no fundamental reason for thinking that the tension between these components cannot be reduced, if not completely eliminated. For it now appears that Hume’s views on intelligibility, that can help reconcile the ontological views of the vulgar with those of the philosopher, can equally point the way to a resolution of the tension in the foundation of Hume’s account of the self. With this conception of intelligibility the contractions that have been alluded to in the appendix may well be dispelled and Hume’s labyrinth dissolved.

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