

Hume's Labyrinth:
A Search for the Self

By

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**CAMBRIDGE
SCHOLARS**

P U B L I S H I N G

This work is dedicated to a very close friend, Sam.
Thank you.

Hume's Labyrinth: A Search for the Self,
by Alan Schwerin

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If you look at something often enough you begin to see it.

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PREFACE

David Hume is reputed to be one of the most significant philosophers to write in the English language. While his contributions to world literature in general have been influential and have received substantial attention and critical treatment over the years, it is his philosophical writings that are most highly prized. And many regard *A Treatise of Human Nature* as the most important of Hume's philosophical bequests, placing it center-stage in their analyses of his philosophical views. With all of this attention, why rake the coals yet again? Surely all that can be gleaned from Hume's philosophical thoughts in the *Treatise* have by now been aired, evaluated and commented on in sufficient depth? Can anything new be said on Hume's philosophy, especially his much acclaimed philosophy of mind? Well, I think so. My view is that a fresh investigation of Hume's thought on the self still has much to offer us, despite the extensive and searching attention it has received from the philosophical community. The efforts here in *Hume's Labyrinth* are prefaced with the assumption that a few will find something

in my analysis to encourage them to revisit Hume's views on the mind, possibly with a different perspective.

This project has benefitted from the contributions from a number of generous benefactors. Monmouth University very kindly awarded me a sabbatical for a year to work on *Hume's Labyrinth*. Members of *The Bertrand Russell Society* put up with my thoughts on Hume (and Russell) at two of their recent annual meetings, prodding me to refine my thinking. Is that not what academic meetings are for? My wife Helen served selflessly as my sounding board as the project progressed and gave me invaluable editorial assistance along the way. As with all of my philosophical contributions, I am indebted to her for forcing me to be clearer and more robust in my analyses. Finally, thank you Rich and Sue Mayfield for the opportunity to reflect on Hume from the vantage point of your beautiful home set high in the spectacular snowy Rockies.

My understanding of Hume's views on the self has evolved substantially over the five years that I have devoted to this project. During this period I have had the opportunity to share – and subsequently refine – my thoughts on Hume and the self with the audiences of two journals of philosophy. Very different versions of my arguments in chapter six were

published in the *Journal of Scottish Philosophy* and *Metaphysica* respectively. Finally, please note that all references in *Hume's Labyrinth* to Hume's *Treatise* are to the Selby – Bigge edition that was published by Oxford University Press in 1978.

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INTRODUCTION

It bears indeed incontestable Marks of a great Capacity, of a Soaring Genius, but young, and not yet thoroughly practiced.

—*The History of the Works of the Learned* 1739

The section of David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* that is devoted to personal identity is a mere thirteen pages long. Given that this work is six hundred and thirty-nine pages in length one might be tempted to conclude that Hume's discussion of personal identity constitutes a relatively insignificant component of his overall analysis of human nature.¹ Nothing would be further from the truth. As concise as this section is, it contains some of the most inflammatory and controversial material in the *Treatise*. Unfortunately, this component also happens to contain some of the most challenging arguments in the text. *Hume's Labyrinth* is an attempt to throw some light on these arguments.

Our difficulties begin with the fact that while the section is ostensibly on personal identity – Hume gives it the title, “Of

¹ I am alluding to the pagination from the Selby-Bigge edition of the *Treatise*.

personal identity” – its central concern does not appear to be personal identity, but the self. This is the primary section of the *Treatise* that is devoted to a critical analysis of competing philosophies of the mind. Unfortunately, the account of the mind or self as Hume prefers to call it, which emerges from this component of the *Treatise*, proves to be obscure, incomplete and possibly incoherent. The reasoning here is particularly challenging as his thoughts are sometimes confusing and often not fully developed. These shortcomings are bound to frustrate the dispassionate reader. As exciting and provocative as his view is on the self, the *Treatise* arguments for this account leave much to be desired. And Hume is the first to admit this!

In the appendix to the *Treatise* Hume decries the fact that his thoughts on the self and personal identity in the main text are inadequate. As he sees it, his account is incoherent and contains positions that are erroneous:

But upon a more strict review of the section concerning *personal identity*, 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)

Confessions like this are rare and noteworthy, especially when one bears in mind that the *Treatise* is Hume's first major

publication. Fathers tend to be particularly proud of their first – born, if not a little apprehensive. But if the main text is as problematic as Hume suggests it is, can the *Treatise* be used as a reliable source for an account of the self? If so, how ought we to approach it? How do we acquire a clear and persuasive view of the self from a text that its own author admits is defective? Perhaps the answer lies with Hume's postpartum reflections on the *Treatise*? Might the appendix not serve as a guide to those difficult and innovative ideas on the self in the main text? I think so.

Hume's Labyrinth is in part an attempt to show that a careful analysis of Hume's critical reflections in the appendix reveals a way out of the conundrums that apparently beset his account of the self. Part of my mission is to show how the appendix can be used to clarify and more precisely delineate the central elements of Hume's *Treatise* arguments for his account of the self. Contrary to a widely held view of his commentators, my suggestion is that the appendix throws an invaluable light on Hume's challenging account of the self. Equipped with this insight into the author's understanding of the shortcomings of the ideas and arguments in the main text I

² This question presupposes a larger and fascinating issue: namely, that in the *Treatise* Hume intends to produce a reliable account of the self. In chapter seven I shall review this and related issues.

argue that we will be in the position to better appreciate his philosophy of mind. But this indirect journey into Hume's thought on the self is not straightforward, as the appendix is itself convoluted and opaque. We will need to tread carefully on this path.

As one reads the appendix one is stuck by the disparity between this material and the main text. In the first place, the *tone* of the writing in the appendix departs significantly from that of the main text. What we have with the critical reflections on the *Treatise* discussion of personal identity and the self is overt soul searching from Hume. There are numerous despairing references to the defects, especially the logical defects, of the arguments in the main text. Hume is clearly disappointed, if not frustrated by the shortcomings that he sees in his account of the self. However, the section on his views on personal identity and the self in the main text contains not a hint of these later misgivings. In the *Treatise* section "Of personal identity" we have a confident thinker boldly laying out his ideas and arguments for his innovative account of the self. Each task in this section is tackled with gusto. There are no reservations or qualifications here in the analysis. Hume appears to be presenting us with a series of categorical, if not brash, ideas and arguments clearly designed

to grab the attention of the reader. I guess that this is a case of Hume acceding to the warning that a feint heart never wins the fair lady. The reader of the *Treatise* treatment of the self and personal identity is left with the distinct impression that our young Hume has found the truth about the self, that he is not short of criticisms of his rivals' philosophical views and that he is not afraid to explain away the motives for their (allegedly mistaken) views. Hume is clearly very confident of himself here. In this section there certainly is not even a suggestion of a foul labyrinth undermining his thought.

If Hume is genuinely of the opinion that his ideas and arguments on the self are defective he certainly does not point this out to his audience in the main text of the *Treatise*. Talk about the problems endemic to his account of the self and its arguments emerge only later in the appendix to the *Treatise*. Is it possible, one is tempted to ask, that Hume overlooked these problems when first presenting his thoughts? Did he not notice them at the time? Or did he intentionally decide to keep them out of view, perhaps to be dealt with more fully later? I shall address this interesting aspect of Hume's thought on his arguments on the self in my final chapter.

So what fuels Hume's initial confidence when he outlines his views on the self in "Of personal identity" – a confidence

that later seems to dissipate? There can be little doubt that a significant factor that accounts for his bold thought on the self is his adoption of a philosophy of language that owes much to George Berkeley. Hume is clearly impressed with Berkeley's attack against abstract ideas, with its innovative proposals on language, especially names:

I look upon this to be one of the greatest and most valuable discoveries that has been made of late years in the republic of letters ... (*Treatise* 17)

My argument is that these important and "valuable discoveries" that Hume is alluding to here feature prominently later in the *Treatise* when Hume presents his provocative theory of the self. In chapters four and five I attempt to show precisely how Berkeley's suggestions on language, most importantly his insights into names, influence Hume's own philosophy of language and subsequently dictate the confident thrust of his arguments in "Of personal identity". To better grasp the foundation of the arguments that Hume relies on for his account of the self – and to more fully appreciate the source of the confidence that sustains these arguments – one *must* understand the connection between Hume's views on language and that advocated by his esteemed Irish colleague. As I see it, far too many commentators on Hume's arguments

on the self have not given this connection sufficient attention in their analyses. In *Hume's Labyrinth* an attempt is made to correct this shortcoming.

Besides the tone, however, there is a second and arguably more important difference between the appendix and the discussion in the main text from the *Treatise* on personal identity and the self. The *content* of these two components differ significantly. In broad terms, the section "Of personal identity" dwells on three issues: the specification of Hume's rivals' view on the self, the presentation of his own deflationary view of the self and finally, the presentation, for the most part, of a series of explanations from Hume to account for the willingness of his rivals to bestow identity on discrete physical objects and perceptions in terms of unperceived metaphysical substances. But when we turn to Hume's critical reflections on his ideas and arguments on the self in the appendix we are surprised: most of the material from the main text remains untouched. More specifically, the appendix contains nothing on his analysis of his rivals' account of the self and says absolutely nothing about the explanations that feature so prominently in the main text. This latter omission is most striking, as Hume's explanations account for more than seventy-five percent of the space

devoted to personal identity and the self. Fully ten of the thirteen pages of the *Treatise* discussion on personal identity and the self are devoted, for the most part, to Hume's explanations for the tendency of "some metaphysicians" to "ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possess of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives". (*Treatise* 253) None of these explanations are even mentioned, let alone critiqued in the appendix! Furthermore, when Hume eventually does connect his reflections on his discussion on the self in the appendix to those in the main text, he actually draws attention to tangential aspects of the *Treatise* analysis. For when he critically reconsiders his own views on the self in the appendix Hume shifts his focus entirely to a set of meta-logical issues. Now he concentrates on the merits of the *logic* of his reasoning for his thesis on the self and personal identity in the *Treatise*: an aspect of his account of the self that is not even hinted at, let alone explored in any detail in the main text.

Given these significant departures from the main text can the appendix serve any useful purpose in our attempts to understand Hume's views on the self? I think that it can, and shall attempt to substantiate this proposal in the course of this

essay. My view is that the appendix contains fascinating elements that help crystallize crucial components of Hume's *Treatise* account of the self. Without the appendix some of these vital elements in his analysis are likely to be misunderstood, if not entirely overlooked. Naturally, at the end of the day the reader must decide for herself whether or not my efforts at viewing the *Treatise* account of the self from the perspective of Hume's appendix have been successful, and perhaps useful.