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**Language and Hume’s Search for a Theory of the Self**

**Abstract**: In his *Treatise* Hume makes a profound suggestion: philosophical problems, especially problems in metaphysics, are verbal. This view is most vigorously articulated and defended in the course of his investigation of the problem of the self, in the section “Of personal identity.” My paper is a critical exploration of Hume’s arguments for this influential thesis and an analysis of the context that informs this 1739 version of the nature of philosophical problems that anticipates the linguistic turn in philosophy.

**Keywords**: self, language, perceptions, personal identity, Kuhn, bundle theory, ontology, indeterminacy, pragmatism

DOI 10.1515/mp-2015-0008

I am convinced that no Man can comprehend what he means.

(Letter to *Common Sense: Or the Englishman*’*s Journal* 1740)

When David Hume defends a novel and provocative account of the self in the section “Of personal identity” in his *Treatise of Human Nature*, and contrasts it with that of his rivals, he suggests that his is the more reasonable and scientifically rigorous thesis. As he puts it, not without a twinge of exasperation, “If any one upon serious and unprejudic’d reflexion, thinks he has a different notion of *himself*, I must confess I can reason no longer with him” (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 252). The reception accorded Hume’s views on the self, at least within the philosophical community, appears to bear out this assessment. The bundle theory of the self has certainly been influential among philosophers, acquiring an expanding coterie of advocates since its publication in 1739. What is more, the influence of Hume’s views on the self continues to grow. While many have found a variety of ideas and arguments in Hume’s diverse philosophical contributions noteworthy and provocative, the investigation of theories on the self in his *magnum opus* has proven to be especially exigent and an ongoing source of analysis and speculation for philosophers. His challenging arguments on these theories of the self continue to stimulate researchers, providing them with an invaluable framework for their own \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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investigations into the mind: providing them with a perspective from the mid-eighteenth century that persists within the philosophical community in large measure due to its heuristic value. Many philosophers today who are intent on promoting their own solutions to the problems of the mind still draw on Hume’s *Treatise* insights in their own efforts to enhance their understanding of the intricacies of the complex issues endemic to the issues on the mind. Hume is certainly not passé in the philosophical community – well, certainly not within that segment of the community that has been actively exploring issues from the philosophy of the mind in the past century.

How do we account for the resilience of Hume’s account of the self? This paper is an attempt to throw some light on this important question. In the course of my analysis some suggestions will be made on the dominance of Hume’s views on the self and on the relationship between this influential conceptual framework and that of his rivals. More importantly, I shall show that Hume’s 1739 analysis of the problems of the self anticipates the linguistic turn of modern analytic philosophers with what I call his c*oup de grâce* argument: a line of reasoning that I shall argue is invalid. However, as I shall also show, this invalidity is revealing in that it opens a fascinating vista into Hume’s presuppositions in the *Treatise*. But first a preliminary issue needs to be addressed. Who are the modern philosophers who are provoked by, if not inspired by, Hume?

Norman Kemp Smith’s *The Philosophy of David Hume*, with its accessible naturalistic interpretation of Hume’s philosophy, inaugurated a resurgence of interest in Hume’s views in general in the 1940s. But it was the publication of Peter Strawson’s *Individuals* that placed Hume’s no-substantial self-theory of the self – with its accompanying cluster of interconnected concerns – center stage among the leading modern conceptions of the mind. When Strawson argues, as he does in his chapter “Persons,” that “the word ‘I’ never refers to this, the pure subject” he is explicitly endorsing Hume’s no-substantial self-view of a person (Strawson 1979, 103). Clearly inspired by the *Treatise* critique of the substantial theory of the self, Strawson pointedly reminds his readers that it is the reasonable search for an ego-substance, the purported seat of pure consciousness, that ultimately encourages Hume to adopt a view of the self that many find counterintuitive:

It was the entity corresponding to this illusory primary concept of the pure consciousness, the ego-substance, for which Hume was seeking, or ironically pretending to seek, when he looked into himself, and complained that he could never discover himself without a perception and could never discover anything but the perception. (Strawson 1979, 103).

While the analysis that is presented by Strawson in his *Individuals* might be one of the most prominent instances of the impact of Hume’s views on current theories on the self within the philosophical community, there are many other examples of the abiding influence of Hume’s thought. His bundle thesis of the self and its arguments continue to guide reflections on the self and its theories. Let me cite but a few of the most recent analyses influenced by Hume.

Derek Parfit’s (1984) suggestion that a person is an evolving series of related experiences – a claim presented and argued for in his *Reasons and Persons* – is heavily indebted to Hume’s bundle theory. In his *Consciousness Explained* Daniel Dennett argues

that consciousness “in fact is gappy” and that the self “could be just as gappy” (Dennett 1991, 423). This is a view that appears to be consistent with, and apparently has been influenced by, Hume’s fluid bundle theory of the self. (On this issue see his chapter entitled “The reality of selves.”) Finally, Thomas Nagel’s account of the self and consciousness in *A View from Nowhere* also appears to be inspired by Hume’s suggestion that the concept of personal identity cannot be understood “through an examination of my first- person concept of self” (Nagel 1986, 35).

All this suggests that Hume’s view on the self is still current. There is little doubt that this account of the self has not only survived the vicissitudes of time, but in one way or another it continues to influence members of the philosophical community. Why? That this account of the self continues to guide much of the research of philosophers into the mind is surprising. Hume himself has serious misgivings about his views, as his appendix to the *Treatise* amply testifies. The labyrinth that he finds himself in, in large measure due to his views on perceptions and the inability of the mind to isolate connections between discrete perceptions, encourages Hume to declare that, where the problem of the self is concerned, the “difficulty is too hard for my understanding” (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 636). The theory on the self that is promoted by Hume, with its concomitant implications, is clearly not as problem-free as its author would like it to be. Yet the bundle theory of the self has proven to be influential – at least among philosophers – as I have suggested above. So how serious can the problems be that Hume has singled out for his theory of the self if many, after all these years, continue to draw inspiration from it?

Hume’s reflections in the appendix to the *Treatise* leaves one with the distinct impression that as far as he is concerned his account of the self is *not fundamentally flawed*, and is not necessarily intractable. In his critical remarks there on the arguments in section VI “Of personal identity” Hume reluctantly declares that while *he* is unable to resolve his problem, others might be able to do so. After dejectedly concluding that he “must plead the privilege of a sceptic” unable to resolve the difficulties that he has unearthed, Hume allows for the possibility that others might have more success at solving the problems (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 636). And in the event that other philosophers are unsuccessful in their attempts to solve the problems unearthed in the appendix to the *Treatise*, Hume wonders whether or not he will be able to solve the problem when he is more mature. As he puts it, somewhat plaintively, “others, perhaps, or myself, upon more mature reflection, may discover” a solution to the problem (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 636). All of which suggests, as far as Hume is concerned, that the problem with his account of the self is not impossible to solve, but merely temporarily obdurate.

Nevertheless, Hume’s subsequent reluctance – “failure” is perhaps a more apt term here – to approach this problem apparently endemic to his theory of the mind in his later philosophical endeavors strongly suggests that he never does come to terms with the issue as he presents it in the appendix to the *Treatise*. And if the problem that appears to be embedded in his account of the self remains untouched – or, at least not dealt with by its author – it is reasonable to conclude that the theory of the self that is proposed by Hume in the *Treatise* must itself have lost much of its luster fairly soon after its initial presentation. But if this suggestion that the author of the notorious bundle theory of the self appears to distance himself from his creation is plausible, one wonders why others continue to be inspired by this theory of the self? Why does Hume’s

problematic account of the self continue to attract adherents among the members of the philosophical community? That it continues to be influential, if not entirely persuasive, seems counterintuitive, at least for the following two reasons.

In the first place, it appears that Hume’s own critical investigations into his account of the self ought to diminish its appeal. To the best of my knowledge the central problem integral to Hume’s conceptual scheme that philosophers interested in the self apparently need to resolve that he unearths in his appendix remains unattended. When Hume argues that his account of the self rests on two inconsistent propositions, or principles as he prefers to call them, he is drawing attention to a problem that he views as serious:

In short, there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them. viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences*, and that *the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*. (Hume 1978, 35 *Treatise* 636, my underlining)

As Hume sees it, this so-called “inconsistent” set of principles drives him into a vexing labyrinth with its confusing suggestions on the mind. But his readers do not appear to be concerned about these critical reflections from Hume. If Hume himself finds his account of the self problematic, surely others, now forewarned about its shortcomings, ought to distance themselves from this theory? That they do not is surprising. For one thing, if I am correct in my suggestion that Hume *himself* does not revisit the problem in his later writings it seems plausible to infer that he either was not able to solve the problem or that he simply lost interest in it. So one of the central problems on which the bundle theory of the self rests appears to remain unresolved by its author. Furthermore, it seems that others who ought to address the difficulties encapsulated by this problem have also failed to address them. For instance, none of the philosophers of the mind mentioned above who are inspired by Hume’s bundle theory of the self even acknowledge the existence of the central problem that Hume outlines in his appendix, let alone attempts to solve it. And as far as I can determine, no other philosopher has presented us with a solution to Hume’s problem. So it appears that Hume’s theory of the self persists within the philosophical community, warts and all. If we work on the assumption that his advocates are aware of his reservations, the willingness to continue to rely on his (problematic) thought on the self suggests that “the defects” with this account of the self are not regarded as fatal by his advocates but are viewed by them as mere minor aberrations: perhaps, with the appropriate attention and application the problem can be solved and removed. This brings us to the second reason for wondering about the persistent positive reception accorded Hume’s problematic account of the self.

Contributions to the science of the mind have flourished since the publication of Hume’s *Treatise*. His bundle theory of the self now has to contend with literally dozens of rivals. Given the proliferation of alternative accounts of the self, in large measure fueled by the growing interest in psychology, the appeal of the bundle theory of the self would surely have diminished, and not grown as it has within the philosophical community. In light of his admission that the account of the self in the *Treatise* is defective, the fact that it coexists shoulder-to-shoulder with numerous competing conceptions makes one wonder about the continued appeal and influence of the Scot’s mid-eighteenth-century account of the self. This view of the self has certainly had a long innings. How do we explain the

resiliency of Hume’s bundle theory on the self? One philosopher who might hold the key to an answer to this question is Thomas Kuhn. In numerous publications of his Kuhn provides us with invaluable insights into theory acceptance that I suggest can be drawn on in our quest to understand the reasons for the continued significance, if not prominence of Hume’s bundle theory of the self among researchers interested in problems on the mind. Let us briefly visit Kuhn’s views on theory acceptance in order to better appreciate the continued appeal of Hume’s views on the self.

**Section one: Kuhn on theory acceptance and the many unanticipated observations**

In his discussion of theories and their reception Kuhn suggests that researchers are looking for guidance and are drawn to those accounts that offer the prospects of revealing inroads into the problems that interest them. Consider the field of astronomy with its proliferation of ingenious theories to help understand the constitution of the universe. As Kuhn sees it, while many of the earlier views of the universe are intriguing from a theoretical point of view, what distinguish some of the more appealing accounts are their pragmatic consequences. Some of these theories have definite practical implications, suggesting specific solutions to a number of down-to-earth problems. Take the problem of circumnavigating the globe. As soon as astronomers adopted what Kuhn calls the two-sphere cosmology, according to which mankind on earth is viewed as occupying an inner sphere and the stars that surround us an external sphere, a number of practical consequences came into play. Most importantly, for Kuhn, this decision encouraged individuals to wonder about the shape of the earth, eventually giving rise to the suggestion that the earth has a circumference: an implication that had profound consequences. So the two-sphere cosmology ultimately led to a set of observations that supported the view that one could successfully sail around the earth. Navigators, such as Christopher Columbus, found much comfort from this outlook, relying on it to guide their actions:

One set of observations … led Columbus to believe that the circumnavigation of the globe was a practical undertaking, and the results of his voyages have been recorded. Those voyages and the subsequent travels of Magellan and others provided observational evidence for beliefs that had previously been derived solely from theory, and the supplied science with many unanticipated observations besides. (Kuhn 1957, 40)

Had the two-sphere theory of the universe not been adopted Columbus would not have undertaken his voyages and new observations and contributions would not have accrued to mankind in general, and to the sciences in particular. More importantly, without the sensory evidence acquired by intrepid explorers such as Columbus and Magellan the conception of the universe endorsed by researchers interested in the heavens would continue to be founded on *a priori* considerations. That is to say, their cosmological views would be beholden to non- empirical or theoretical speculations, for their cosmological “beliefs (would be) derived solely from theory” (Kuhn 1957, 40: my insert). Thus the adoption of a different theory by researchers can put them in the position to accomplish a great deal that otherwise would not be attainable with the “older” perspective. The adoption of a new theory now makes possible “many unanticipated observations.” As Kuhn sees it, theories can be especially useful in practice, often literally guiding the “scientist into the unknown, telling him where to look and what he may expect to find” (Kuhn 1957, 40).

In short, theories provide the researcher with a vision or *gestalt* that reveals further avenues for research that would otherwise remain invisible.

However, as fruitful as the theory might be, its adoption and application is not without glitches. The scientist will not find the perspective provided by the theory problem-free. Difficulties are bound to arise that are not easy to circumvent. For this reason the scientist is advised to view the novel theory as a helpful conceptual scheme that provides “*hints* for the organization of research rather than explicit directives, and the pursuit of these hints usually requires extension or modification of the conceptual scheme that provided them” (Kuhn 1957, 40, my emphasis). I think that this insight from Kuhn is very important and particularly suggestive for us in our attempts to understand and do justice to Hume’s account of the self. Is this not precisely what Hume is doing with his bundle theory of the self? Is he not providing himself and the rest of us with *hints* on how to think about the self? Perhaps the theory of the self that emerges from the section “Of personal identity” in the *Treatise* is not to be viewed as a *definitive* account of the self that is regarded by its author as categorically true, but as a *tentative* proposal ripe with suggestions on how researchers are encouraged to proceed in their research into human nature? Sure, Hume argues vigorously for his views and spends much time and energy assessing and dispelling the leading rival account of the self. That he does this so enthusiastically misleadingly encourages us to subscribe to the view that Hume is *fully* committed to his novel view of the self. But perhaps his commitment is not as comprehensive as we might be inclined to think? As attractive as the proposal provided by Hume on the self might be, and as convincing as his arguments in its favor might appear to be, Hume is well aware of the fact that his bundle theory of the self still has its limitations. And he is more than willing to point them out to us. With his appendix Hume takes the lead in drawing attention to some of the difficulties associated with his innovative theory on the self: problematic issues that emerge only if one takes seriously and accepts – even if only partially – the *Treatise*’*s* conceptual scheme on the self. In short, perhaps in section VI of the *Treatise* Hume is best seen as presenting us with a working hypothesis on the mind that is only at its embryonic stage in its development. This undeveloped or immature conception of a person ought therefore to be seen as little more than a useful hint for researchers interested in the study of human nature. The hypothesis, on this understanding, still needs to be refined – or carefully nurtured, to extend the metaphor – to hopefully eventually yield a fully-fledged robust theory of the mind fully capable of assisting researchers working on the science of human nature. This perspective of Hume’s contribution to problems on the mind has a number of fascinating implications for our understanding of Hume’s excursion into the science of human nature, some of which we need to explore.

As with the astronomer with his theory of two-spheres and its concomitant practical ramifications for astronomy, Hume can be viewed as a researcher interested in a set of challenging problems outlining a vision that he regards as useful. His hope is that others will find his insights equally attractive. The bundle theory of the self, as I see it, can thus be seen as a convenient means for solving – or at least of *promising* to solve – thorny problems on the self that previous theorists found intractable. As such it is not to be regarded as the *final* solution to these problems but as a valuable stepping stone or

fruitful avenue for future research into the problems on the mind. As with a child who needs careful nourishment and attention in order to develop into a healthy strong adult, ready to both take her place in the world and to contribute to mankind, Hume’s bundle theory of the self is to be seen as a potentially useful addition to the intellectual tools scientists rely on in their research into the challenging issues that face them. This perspective of Hume’s bundle theory of the self, begs a number of questions, one of which strikes me as central: is it plausible? As interesting, and possibly as useful an interpretative framework this interpretation of Hume’s account of the self might be, we still need to find support for it from the text: whether the *Treatise* or some other text from Hume. Without a text to support this perspective of Hume’s analysis we run the risk of foisting an anachronistic framework on the discussion in section VI of the *Treatise*. So does Hume provide us with any reason to support what I think is appropriately called a *pragmatic* interpretation of his account of the self?

As it happens, there is strong textual support for this pragmatic interpretation of Hume. Both Hume’s *Treatise* and some of his other writings leave us with the distinct impression that Hume’s bundle theory of the self ought not to be viewed as a categorical thesis but as a heuristic aid for researchers interested in problems of the mind. Before we consider the textual evidence from the *Treatise* to determine whether or not this pragmatic perspective is plausible, it is useful for us to recall remarks made by Hume towards the end of his life when he was reflecting on the overall impact of his contributions to philosophy. In his auto-biography “My own life” completed in April 1776, mere weeks before his death, Hume reflects on his philosophical contributions over the years and explicitly relies on the metaphor of a dead *infant* to articulate his views – a powerful metaphor that resonates with my suggestions in this chapter. Of all the images that he could have alluded to in order to express his views he selects a particularly grotesque image that leaves us in no doubt about the depth of his pain and disappointment. In his sober reflections on his early philosophical contributions, and in particular, in his assessment of the responses to those nascent contributions, Hume opines that his views in the *Treatise* were not noticed and that they were left to die at birth. Even the presumably harsh and insensitive zealots, forever on the lookout for a morsel to victimize, overlooked his work, thereby resisting the temptation to touch his innovative contributions to the philosophical community:

Never literary attempt was more unfortunate than my *Treatise of Human Nature*. It fell dead-born from the press, without reaching such distinction, as even to excite a murmur among the zealots.

(*History of England*, Volume One: 1778)

As Hume sees it, his precious and fragile *Treatise* had little chance to survive, given this silence from the presumably more animated members of the community of letters. What are the prospects for an innovative text if even those in the best position to do so – namely the energetic zealots who are deeply interested in the issues – are unwilling to deign to critique his thought? Others, less enthused by the issues dealt with by the *Treatise*, would surely be even less inclined to engage with it. As provocative as the material might be, it stood no chance of stirring individuals less interested in and less enthused about the problems that Hume had written about. This failure of his work to stir anyone – whether due to their latent insensitivity or to some characteristic of the text itself is not clear from

Hume’s assessment here – had a serious detrimental effect on the subsequent contributions from the aspiring philosopher. With no one noticing, commenting on and possibly developing his work, it died quickly, retreating to obscurity. And with the demise of his theory on the self the members of the philosophical community were denied the opportunity to explore and possibly refine a theory that Hume regarded as useful, even if somewhat controversial. So the sentiments in his autobiography make it clear that as far as Hume is concerned the reception that his thought on the self receives is most unfortunate. For in the end, as he sees it, the members of the targeted audience of researchers who are interested in problems on human nature that the *Treatise* is meant to reach and serve are not touched by his ideas.

His characterization of the reaction accorded his work is most suggestive. As he sees it his philosophical contributions – and this presumably includes his centrally important contributions on the self – are denied the opportunity to develop into fully mature, useful theories that could assist scholars in the various fields that Hume is contributing to. The powerful metaphor of a theory falling dead from the press at birth not only says something about Hume’s disappointment about the reception meted out to the theory, but equally importantly, reveals a great deal about Hume’s understanding of his contribution. As he sees it, his philosophical creation – i.e., the *Treatise* – is an undeveloped infant that still needs to be guided and assisted in its development. This work is not a fully mature, independent being with the ability to fend for itself. So the views that he is presenting to his audience in the *Treatise* – and by implication his account of the self in section VI – must be given the opportunity to develop into robust self-sustaining theories, able to assist others interested in the problems that Hume is exploring. That they remain little more than lifeless fetuses – with unfulfilled promising futures – is an indictment of the members of the community to which these precious, potentially useful gifts have been presented.

But can the theories that Hume presents in his *magnum opus* be seen from a pragmatic perspective? More specifically, is there material in the *Treatise* that lends credence to my suggestion that Hume’s bundle theory of the self ought to be viewed as a useful, albeit undeveloped theory? My argument below will attempt to show that a close reading of his discussion in section VI strongly suggests that the pragmatic interpretation of Hume’s bundle thesis *is* viable. However, as I shall also point out, the textual evidence from the *Treatise* not only lends support for the pragmatic understanding of his bundle thesis on the self but also gives rise to difficulties that if left unattended are likely to cast Hume’s views in a misleading light. My argument is that these apparent textual aberrations must be dealt with carefully.

While making it difficult for Hume’s readers to determine with confidence precisely where he stands on the issues that he is exploring, the so-called “problems with the text” appear to serve a fascinating purpose as they reveal an important dimension to Hume’s thought on attempts to construct viable and meaningful theories on the mind. As we shall see, a consideration of these irregularities helps reveal aspects of Hume’s thought on the mind that might otherwise escape our attention. But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Before we consider what I regard as the role of these intentional irregularities in Hume’s text, we need to consider the

evidence for my claim that his text is both pragmatic and irregular.

An investigation of the *Treatise* analysis of the problem of personal identity does appear to support a pragmatic interpretation of Hume’s account of the self. While the tone of his writing in “Of personal identity” suggests otherwise, there are numerous clues in the text that Hume is not categorical about his bundle thesis on the self. His writing here suggests that he regards his theory on the self as a useful, yet undeveloped proposal for the nascent philosophy of the mind that he is interested in. That Hume does not view his account of the self as definitive, but as a tentative hypothesis in need of additional supplements becomes apparent when we remember how central analogies are to Hume when he discusses his thesis on the self. For instance, when Hume compares the mind to a theater he makes it immediately clear to the reader that as helpful as this comparison might be, much still needs to be done to make his views more robust and complete. As he warns us, the

comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only that constitute the mind; no have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the material, of which it is compos’d.

(Hume 1978, *Treatise* 253)

Hume’s willingness to draw on the illustrative powers of the theater analogy – along with the many other analogies that he relies on in the section “Of personal identity” – reminds us that as far as he is concerned the bundle theory of the self is not self-sufficient from an explanatory point of view. This view of the self is clearly regarded by Hume as tentative and incomplete. Had his theory on the self been definitive there surely would be no need to explain and elaborate on it. This suggests, as I see it, that Hume’s bundle theory of the self is regarded by its author as a working hypothesis in need of further nurturing: an untested new-born theory that has promise. While Hume is clearly convinced that his untested bundle theory of the self is useful, and ought to be put to use by those members of the philosophical community who are interested in understanding human nature, his cautionary asides on the analogies that he draws on when articulating his view on the self serve as warnings that his approach to their problems is not the final solution. As he intimates, more still needs to be done by those philosophers who are attempted to apply his views on the self to their problems on the mind. In the process, the bundle theory will likely be altered in the light of the additional required research.

So there does appear to be at least some, possibly minor, textual support for my suggestion that Hume’s bundle theory on the self can be viewed as a thesis with pragmatic value. But are there more substantial reasons for adopting this pragmatic interpretation? I think so. Let’s begin with an analysis of what I regard as the most compelling evidence from the *Treatise* for this interpretation of his thought. This is Hume’s enthusiastic endorsement of the bundle theory’s ability solve a problem that he regards as otherwise intractable: namely, the problem of personal identity.

Section VI of the *Treatise* opens with a scathing attack on the substance theory of the self. But the demise of this entrenched view of a person gives rise to a serious problem, as far as Hume is concerned: without the established theory of a substantial self, how do we account for the willingness of individuals to think and speak about themselves as

singular individuals? As Hume ironically puts it early in the section, what evidence there is happens to support an alternative theory of the self – a theory that advocates a *non*-substance view of a person, even though individuals mistakenly persist in subscribing to and promoting the faulty substance theory of the self. And the non-substance theory of the self that Hume presents to us is his bundle theory of the self, of course: a theory that is supported by much evidence, as far as he is concerned. What is more, his (non-substance) bundle theory of the self is not only grounded in accessible evidence, it offers investigators into the mind an invaluable advantage over its rival: with this theory one can explain why individuals endorse the discredited view on an unchanging, simple substantial self. This is a very important virtue of the new theory, as far as Hume is concerned. One of the benefits of the bundle theory of the self, as he sees it, is that it can be used to explain the willingness of individuals to continue to subscribe to the traditional conception of personal identity even though the substance theory of the self is false. But this is not all! Not only has this novel theory the explanatory power that researchers who are interested in the problems of human nature desire – such as the ability to help solve the problem of personal identity – it has this explanatory power in abundance, as far as Hume is concerned. For with this theory not only is it possible to produce an explanation for the willingness of individuals to “ascribe an identity” to themselves – the non-existence of a recurrent unchanging substantial self notwithstanding – it is possible to produce a *complete* explanation, i.e., we can now “explain [this willingness mistakenly to ascribe identity to mysterious substances] *perfectly*” (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 253, my insert and emphasis). In short, as far as Hume is concerned, his bundle theory of the self more than proves itself in practice, for with it researchers can provide complete explanations for the tendency of individuals to ascribe identity to themselves in an ontologically misleading manner.

That his theory of the self proves so successful delights Hume to no end. Flush with the successful application of his bundle theory of the self at explaining the mistaken attribution of identity to a non-existent substance, Hume concludes his discussion in section VI “Of personal identity” on a triumphant note: at last, we are now able to set aside this broad issue. With the complete explanation that Hume’s bundle theory of the self has made possible it is now possible to move onto new pastures. Satisfied that the apparently intractable problem of personal identity has been laid to rest we are at liberty to turn our attention to some of the other problems of human nature that call for investigation. As he proudly declares,

‘Tis now time to return to a more close examination of our subject, and to proceed in the

accurate anatomy of human nature, *having fully explain*’*d the nature of our judgment and understanding*.

(Hume 1978, *Treatise* 263, my emphasis)

Once again Hume makes it clear to his audience that his philosophical views –

that are founded on his account of the self – have made it possible to produce yet another *complete* set of explanations. With the problem of personal identity out of the way, two of the broader problems of interest to philosophers can also be satisfactorily resolved: namely the problem on the nature of judgment and issues on the understanding. And as with the resolution of the problem of personal identity, the success with these different,

yet related philosophical problems is unequivocal. As he sees it, as with his analysis of the problem of personal identity, there is no need for any reservations about the application of his thought on the self to the problems on judgment and the understanding. The bundle theory on the self can be applied here too, with *total* unmitigated success, due in large measure to the theory’s superior explanatory power. With unqualified successes like these, research into the many problems that underscore the investigations into human nature must surely take account of Hume’s philosophical thought, most notably his views on the self. However, there appear to be one or two creases that still need to be attended to.

Theories that reputably work as well as the one advocated by Hume on the

self warrant significant attention and ought to be taken seriously, scrutinized and where possible, put to use. But there inevitably are a few lingering problems that still call for attention, as useful as the theory might appear to be. In section VI of the *Treatise* Hume alludes to a few of these outstanding issues. The euphoria that emerges at the end of his analysis on the self and his treatment of the issues that circumscribe the problems of personal identity and the broader problems of judgment and understanding is tempered with some sobering reflections on these difficulties. These reservations are apt, as far as Hume is concerned, as the issues that still need attention apparently are important and unsettling. In fact, these issues are so serious, as far as he is concerned, that unless they are attended to, his entire enterprise in section VI might be compromised. As I shall argue below, these are major concerns for Hume and not mere inconsequential “lingering problems,” as their location at the very end of his analysis and my discussion above might suggest. So what are these lingering problems, as I call them? And are they as momentous as is suggested here? Each of these questions calls for closer attention.

# **Section two: Hume and the lingering problems for *any* theory on the self**

What Hume has to say in the midst of his enthusiastic reflections on the reputed virtues of his bundle theory of the self must come as a great surprise to his readers. In a somewhat offhanded manner Hume nonchalantly suggests that the problems that he has so meticulously investigated in section VI of the *Treatise* might actually be beyond the reach of the philosopher:

The whole of this doctrine leads us to a conclusion, which is of great importance in the present affair, *viz*, that *all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can* *never possibly be decided*, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties.

(Hume 1978, *Treatise* 262, my emphasis)

What? Can Hume be serious? After all that has been said and done on these issues in the *Treatise* Hume wants us to accept that there are no dependable decision procedures for settling the problems that play a large role in motivating his bundle theory of the self? Apparently the problems on the mind that have encouraged Hume and many other philosophers to respond to are not as substantial as might have been thought, but merely linguistic, or “grammatical” as he puts it? Who would have thought it? Was his theory of the self not touted as the best, if not the most reasonable solution to a lingering

philosophical problem *about the self*? That is to say, was the theory not intended to help resolve a problem that had enticed misguided philosophers to propose unacceptable metaphysical theories such as the substance theory *of the self*? If the sentiments contained in the quotation on “the nice and subtle questions” above do accurately reflect Hume’s view – that the problems of personal identity, for instance, “can never possibly be decided” – why does he rely on his bundle theory of the self to help explain the willingness of individuals to attribute identity to persons, plants and animals? Persons, plants and animals are not words, but entities that words are reputed to refer to. Had Hume intended from the outset to focus on language – perhaps providing us with a linguistic analysis of terminology associated with the realm of the mind – the arguments that he might have presented to his audience would surely have been quite different from those that he ends up relying on in section VI of the *Treatise*. So why does he even bother to outline his criticisms of his rivals’ substance theory of *the self*, and develop his alternative bundle theory of *the self*, when his view actually appears to be that these theories are moot? Is he simply entertaining his audience with his reasoning on these theories on competing ontologies? Surely not? To suggest this would tempt one to propose that these theories or artifices from Hume are little more than mere contrivances to entertain the minds of idle dilettantes. So what is going on here?

This textual issue is certainly not easy to resolve, in large measure due to the complete absence of guidance from Hume both in section VI of the main section of the *Treatise* and to the total silence on this aspect of his analysis in his appendix. Unfortunately he has neither helped us nor himself with this silence, leaving us to speculate on his unstated intentions here. Yet the allegations that Hume presents on “all the nice and subtle questions” at the end of his analysis into the problems of personal identity are serious and call for close attention. So we are not at liberty to ignore them. How then do we reconcile Hume’s remarks on the indeterminacy of the problems on personal identity with his earlier excursions into the problems of personal identity and the self and the emergence of Hume’s triumphant bundle theory of the self?

One approach to the problem that has been articulated in the previous paragraph is to consider the respective locations of Hume’s “deflationary” remarks and the theories under consideration. Perhaps the juxtaposition of Hume’s unsettling views on the indeterminacy of the problems on personal identity with the bold, if not brash, articulation of the theories to solve those very problems is intended to drive home a subtle yet important point that might otherwise be lost on the researcher interested in Hume’s views on the mind. Perhaps Hume is suggesting that ultimately the investigation of philosophical questions, like those on the mind and self, is little more than an enquiry into language, *and researchers with their elaborate theories on the self do not realize this*. In broader terms, perhaps Hume is suggesting that unbeknownst to unsuspecting philosophers, ontological issues are fundamentally questions about linguistic matters. And without the preamble in section VI of the *Treatise* to this provocative thesis on indeterminacy, the significance of this insight might be entirely lost on philosophers who are interested in the problem of the mind. If so, perhaps it is useful for Hume to guide us through the initial analyses only to shock us later with his unsettling remarks on the indeterminacy of the problems we were diligently working through. On this interpretation the opening

paragraphs of section VI of the *Treatise* serve as a convenient backdrop for the *coup de grâce*: the claim that our problems on personal identity, and by implication, the problems on the mind, *as we currently understand them*, “can never possibly be decided”. Placed where they are at the end of the chapter, after all the close analyses of the issues that Hume thinks are important and in need of attention – issues on theory formation and evaluation that we also are likely to see as significant and worthy of attention – these unsettling remarks certainly get our attention and drive home his point on language in a dramatic manner.

This *coup de grâce* – namely *after* we have naïvely walked with Hume through a series of problems and suggestions on the self and perceptions – and his subsequent remarks on the indeterminacy of the problems strongly suggests, as I read Hume, that he views the problem on the mind as far more complex than he initially thought it is. What is more, the implicit suggestion appears to be that *the complexity that engulfs the problems of the mind only reveals itself when issues like those explored by Hume in the beginning of section VI are attacked head on*. Without this prior preparation the deeper, more subtle points are likely to be lost on the audience. As with a conjurer who is prepared to reveal his secrets to the audience, the revelations are empty and come across as flat if the explanations precede the conjuring act. That the claim about indeterminacy has the impact that it has is directly related to the fact that the audience has been led along into a world of mystery at the beginning of the performance. While I am not suggesting that Hume is a conjurer, the parallels in the performance strike me as useful. Hume perhaps needs to first present the traditional set of issues and the responses to them in order to more dramatically reveal to us the elements that (initially) are hidden from view. On this interpretation, his remarks on the indeterminacy of the issues on the mind have the impact that they have in large measure due to their location in his analysis: coming as they do at the *end* of his investigation of the issues these profound reflections are especially poignant. This would suggest that there is a hidden subtle complexity embedded in the issues on the problem of the mind that any theorist interested in these problems must attend to but without sufficient diligence is unlikely to detect and resolve. Unless this complexity is identified and dealt with by researchers the theories that they are presenting for the problems of the mind are likely to be inappropriate, if not entirely irrelevant. In short, *if* the problem of personal identity and by implication that of the nature of the self are essentially problems about the use of words, and *if* no one happens to realize this –- other than Hume, of course – the resultant theories are likely to be misguided and seriously misleading.

Now in his characterization of the theories of his rivals Hume says absolutely nothing on the role of language in the formulation of their views. This omission strongly suggests that as far as he is concerned the proponents of the (rival) popular substance theory of the self are not concerned about the influence of language in their endeavors and that they have been deceived into adopting and promoting a misguided ontological scheme on the self. This unfortunate perspective on reality that is endorsed by his rivals, Hume intimates, would likely not materialize had sufficient attention been paid to language and its subtle benign influence on philosophical reflections. All of which suggests that for Hume the *Treatise*, especially the section “Of personal identity,” ought to be viewed as an antidote to a metaphysical

malaise that threatens the integrity of the contributions of the philosophers to a robust philosophy of the mind. For it appears that philosophers are sorely tempted to invent ingenious ontologies in order to further their investigations into problems from the philosophy of mind and end up presenting us with unnecessary and seriously misleading theories of the self. So perhaps the primary objective of section

VI is *not* to present us with a novel theory of the self, as useful as it might be at explaining, for instance, why individuals attribute identity to themselves and entities around them, but to ultimately help us realize the extent of the deception that has ensnared his rivals into adopting faulty theories with their unnecessary ontologies. Furthermore, unless we learn from their mistakes and remain vigilant, *we* are likely to be deceived as well.

This will certainly be an interesting twist to the proceedings if it holds. But does it? My suggestions above rest on a number of critical assumptions, not least of which is the view that the proposal about indeterminacy is to be taken seriously, and is not to be dismissed as a casual aside. What would add weight to this suggestion from Hume is an argument from him for indeterminacy – preferably a convincing argument. So, is there one? What *argument*, if any, does Hume present to his audience that the problems that have occupied them are fundamentally indeterminate? Surely the author of the claim that the problems that have occupied him and the innocent researchers into problems central to issues on human nature owes his audience a set of plausible reasons for the surprising proposal that these problems are actually indeterminate? Anyone who has diligently worked through his earlier prognostications on the merits and demerits of the different theories on the mind will be disappointed, if not sorely dismayed, if there is no justification for this surprising turn of events in Hume’s analysis. So, what reasons do we have from Hume for his sudden provocative suggestion that the search for an understanding of the mind is ultimately a search for an appropriate linguistic framework? And are these reasons persuasive? The section that follows addresses both of these important questions.

**Section three: On Hume’s *coup de grâc*e argument**

The justification that Hume presents for his assertion that the “questions concerning personal identity… are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties” (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 262) draws on his views on ideas, perceptions and language. Unfortunately, the argument appears to be invalid. Let me explain.

The reasoning for the conclusion that the problems of the mind that researchers are working on are grammatical rather than philosophical is concise, as is Hume’s wont. According to him, attributions of identity presuppose that various ideas and perceptions are related to each other. Now these relationships vary from moment to moment, as the composition of the ideas and perceptions change. As he sees it, the ever-changing set of ideas and perceptions in our minds precludes us from using the concept of identity precisely. And given the imprecise application of the concept of identity questions on identity, apparently, are not decidable. But why is this the case? That is to say, even if the minds’ ideas and perceptions are in constant flux and our idea of identity ill-defined, why does Hume insist that “the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided?” (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 262). The answer, it appears, has to do with our inability to use language precisely when describing the activity in our minds. To be more specific, our inability to accurately monitor and precisely label the diverse and dynamic interactions between our ideas and perceptions precludes us from determining exactly when an individual is entitled to say that they are the same individual.

Given that a person is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions,” and given that these perceptions “succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity,” the attempt to determine with precision when a person becomes *that* person as opposed to another person is fraught with difficulties. As far as Hume is concerned, the difficulties are insurmountable.

Given that we are unable to monitor every subtle change in the dynamic set of perceptions that constitute each one of us, we are unable to determine precisely when to stop using one label for the bundle or collection of perceptions and when to begin using a different label. As Hume sees it, this failure to know precisely when to begin to use the appropriate label is the Achilles heel for any attempt to attribute identity to a person. But are his reservations well-founded? Is this shortcoming as problematic as Hume suggests it is? I think that a strong case can be made that Hume is overreacting to the challenges here, and in the processes compromising, if not undermining his surprising proposal on the indeterminacy of the philosophical problems of the mind.

Take this analogy. The cake we are about to bake consists of a variety of ingredients. With the disparate ingredients arranged on the table in front of us we do not have a cake. Call this motley arrangement of items our non-cake. After gathering the required ingredients we begin to blend them together in various ways. That is to say, we begin to mix this item with that, and continue to do so until we get close to the point where we have the requisite components for the cake appropriately blended together. But we still do not have a cake, i.e., the mixture does not exist as a complete cake, and we are therefore precluded from *describing* the mixture as a cake. Now we place the mixture into the warm oven. The ingredients interact in the heated oven and when we open the door to the oven after the appropriate time we have our cake. What initially was a non-cake has now become a cake. At this point we are entitled to describe the item that comes out of the oven as a cake. So we do know when we do not have a cake and we do know when we do have a cake. And the knowledge can be precise. By the same token, we are able to use various descriptions of the entities in front of us with precision. At some point in the process – presumably when the ingredients in the oven interacted sufficiently – the non-cake became a cake. Our inability to be more precise about this aspect of the transition strikes Hume as critical:

But as the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, *we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time*, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity.

(Hume 1978, *Treatise* 262, my emphasis)

As far as he is concerned, if the precise details of the specific actual transition are not known, the *overall* questions on identity cannot be decided either: they “can never possibly be decided.” Apparently, it is not sufficient that we are able to determine what the item is before and after the transition. We *must*, suggests Hume, know precisely when the transition transpired. While we might know *before* the transitional phase that an item is not what it is about to become, and know *after* the transition that the item has become an identifiable item, our failure to know precisely when the item morphed precludes *all* attempts at identifying the item. Why, one might wonder?

This is an important question that calls for some scrutiny.

Surely the data available to us both before and after the vital transitional event enables us to claim that we can successfully use the concept of identify for a major segment of that entities’ existence? Perhaps we are hamstrung for a very brief period: right when the transition occurs. But this surely does not necessarily entail that we cannot invoke the concept of identity at least for a substantial portion of the lifespan of the item in question? When we collect our ingredients we are fully aware that the discrete components do not constitute a cake. And when we later sit down to enjoy the production from the warm oven we are well within our rights to label this as a cake. Is Hume placing undue emphasis on the role of the transitional event – along with our ignorance of the intricacies of this event – in his analysis of identity? I think so.

To make the implausibility of Hume’s concern about the transitional phase more graphic, suppose that the ingredients for the cake have been in containers for five years, waiting to be put to use. Eventually we mix the ingredients according to our recipe and bake our cake, i.e., we heat the ingredients. As it is a simple cake, let us suppose further that this baking process takes a total of seven minutes. Are we to accept that these seven minutes can completely defeat all attempts either before or after the baking process to successfully invoke the concept of the identity of the cake? Surely not? For five years we had absolutely no difficulty in referring to the ingredients of the non-cake that had been collected in anticipation of the big bake, and for many years after the crucial seven minutes of baking we successfully refer to the baked cake. So for the sake of a mere sliver of time we apparently are precluded from using the term “identity” in our dealings with the cake and its ingredients. This seems implausible.

And what about the transitional phase itself? Here, I suggest, we encounter further problems with Hume’s reasoning. Can it be more than an arbitrary *ad hoc* decision to determine when a given combination of constituents C(e-j), acting according to processes P(a-r), becomes X, and ceases to be Y? Hume appears to treat our understanding of the transitional phase as fundamental in our efforts to invoke the concept of identity. But he fails to explain exactly why the transitional phase has the significance that he attributes to it. Without the requisite explanations and justifications on this central issue in his analysis of identity his warning that “all the nice and subtle questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided” must be viewed as unwarranted (Hume 1978, *Treatise* 262). From this it follows, if my discussion above has any merit, that Hume’s views on our inability to resolve questions on the identity of persons is in need of further explanation and justification. As it stands these views on identity seem problematic. So the argument in the *Treatise* for the proposal that the problems of personal identity are fundamentally indeterminate relies on a premise that appears to be implausible, if not false. All of which suggests that Hume’s claim that the problems of personal identity ought “to be regarded as grammatical than as philosophical” appears equally unwarranted. Do other non-*Treatise* renditions of Hume’s views on theories of the self and language resolve the apparent invalidity of his reasoning in the section “Of personal identity?” This is an important issue that we are unable to address here, as it takes us too far afield.

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