Hume's Fictional Impression of Self

1. Introduction

Hume is famous for his discussion of personal identity. In Book I of the *Treatise* he argues that we do not have an idea of self based on a constant and invariable impression. Then, in Book II of his *Treatise*, he argues that, "Tis evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us..." (T 2.1.11.4). On the surface, these are contradictory positions to hold. This presents a puzzle. How can Hume say in Book I that we have no impression of self and then in Books II and III refer to a self as well as build his theories of the passions and morals around an idea of the self?

This paper sets out to solve this puzzle. In this paper I will distinguish between the "self" of Book I and the "self" of Book II. What I argue here is that Hume holds there are two types of personal identity: vulgar and philosophical. What is striking about Hume's position is that he argues that what we believe is the basis of our personal identity does not exist. What follows from this is that our idea of self is an idea that is grounded on a fictional impression and thus we lack personal identity in the sense in which we thought we possessed it. In arguing for my interpretation I will show that Hume utilizes the same methodology he uses with his study of causation to help elucidate the issue of personal identity. Finally, I will indicate how this false belief in self is strong enough to support Hume's work in Books II and III of the Treatise.

2. Hume's Book I Account of Personal Identity

The oddity of Hume's account arises due to the first principle he puts forth in the *Treatise*. At the very beginning of the *Treatise* Hume introduces the "Copy Principle" (T 1.1.1.5). The Copy Principle stems from Hume's observation that every idea resembles some impression (T 1.1.1.4). From

¹ I will refer to all passages in Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* parenthetically with T followed by the numbers of the book, part, section, paragraph. So "T 2.1.11.4" refers to the *Treatise* Book 2, Part 1, Section 11, paragraph 4.

² Recall that Hume defines "impressions" as impressions of sense, the passions, and emotions which are more forceful

that observation, Hume argues that "every simple idea has a simple impression which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea." Simple impressions are impressions that cannot be broken into constituent parts. Every idea is copied from some impression or impressions. This does not, however, mean that we cannot form an idea of something we have never seen. For example, we can separate "virtuousness" from our impression of Mother Theresa and "horse" from Mr. Ed and combine those ideas to form an idea of "virtuous horse". We form an idea of something that we have never had an impression of (a virtuous horse) from other ideas copied from impression we have experienced (virtue and horse).³

Given the Copy Principle, when Hume inquires into where the idea of self was copied from he comes up empty-handed. Because we have an idea of personal identity (i.e. some kind of simple, indivisible self that does not change over time), that simple idea should stem from some simple impression. However, Hume's Book I discussion *Of Personal Identity* makes it clear that we have no idea of self that is based on such a single constant and invariable impression. Hume is looking for a single constant and invariable impression because that is what is commonly taken to make up the impression of self; i.e., when the vulgar⁴ speak of personal identity they believe that they posses some kind of unchanging core over time. However, in Book I of the *Treatise* Hume argues that we never have an impression of self without a corresponding perception; i.e. we never only have an impression of the self, rather we seem to only have an idea of self in relation to other perceptions, e.g. the passions. "I never can catch *myself* at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception" (T 1.4.6.3).

[We] are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement...There is properly no *simplicity* in it at

and lively than "ideas". "Ideas" are fainter images of impressions used in thinking and reasoning (T 1.1.1.1). Both impressions and ideas fall under the category of "perceptions" for Hume.

³ Hume's other famous example to help illustrate this point is that of a "golden mountain".

⁴ In this paper I will refer to the "vulgar" notion of personal identity in several ways (as Hume does). It will be referred to as an "unreflective", "natural", or "default" state of belief regarding personal identity generally held by the unphilosophical masses or anyone who is not thinking philosophically (even a philosopher).

one time, nor identity in different... (T 1.4.6.4).5

All we observe when we introspect are perceptions followed by other perceptions which form bundles of perceptions. Nowhere in these bundles of perceptions do we find a simple idea of self nor an unchanging perception of self. If Hume argues this, why does he then go on to ascribe personal identity to persons?

2.1 How We Conflate Sameness and Diversity

Even though Hume argues that we do not have an impression of self, the vulgar believe we do. Hume's project now in Book I is to account for that belief in personal identity. In order for his account to work Hume needs to be able to explain how we come to have the idea of a simple unchanging self without having an impression of such a self. As it turns out, the answer lies in the imagination.

For Hume, all perceptions are distinct and thus separable; i.e. there are no connections amongst perceptions that join the perceptions together as one.⁶ However, because the imagination easily flows from one perception to another we, more often than not, *unreflectively* assume the strict identity of objects. It is only when we stop and think carefully (i.e. philosophically) about such things that we discover or acknowledge the strict diversity of perceptions and the objects contained within them.

The relation [resemblance] facilitates the transition of the mind from one object to another, and renders its passage as smooth as if it contemplated one continu'd object. This resemblance is the cause of the confusion and mistake, and makes us substitute the notion of identity, instead of that of related objects... Our propensity to this mistake is so great from the resemblance above-mention'd, that we fall into it before we are aware; and tho' we incessantly correct ourselves by reflexion, and return to a more accurate method of thinking, yet we cannot long sustain our philosophy, or take off this biass from the imagination. (T 1.4.6.6)

⁵ Regarding Hume's usage of the terms "simplicity" and "identity": when Hume refers to "simple self" he is referring to a perception of self that does not admit of any "distinction nor separation" (T 1.1.1.2). Hume discusses this at the very beginning of the *Treatise*; e.g. T 1.1.1.7. Recall all our simple ideas are derived/copied from simple impressions; thus if we have an impression corresponding to an idea which we claim to have we cannot truly be said to have that idea. Whereas a perception of an apple is complex (it can be separated into perceptions of color, taste, smell, etc.) the notion of self is thought to be simple in that the self is said to be indivisible. When Hume refers to identity he is referring to sameness over time. Some commentators – e.g. A. E. Pitson – refer to simplicity as "synchronic identity" and sameness over time as "diachronic identity".

⁶ A rough analogy goes like this: think of the Humean view of impressions as a kind of film where each individual frame (impression) is distinct and subtly different from other frames (both close to and further away from any one in question).

We see here that Hume thinks that the close relation among perceptions – namely the resemblance – causes us to believe that the perception is uninterrupted (see also: T 1.4.2.31).

Looking at the role of belief⁷ in relation to identity, when this idea of (feigned) identity is believed, the idea is so lively that the idea resembles an impression. Hume says of belief generally,

The effect, then, of belief is to raise up a simple idea *to an equality with our impressions*, and bestow on it a *like influence on the passions*. This effect it can only have by making an idea approach an impression in force and vivacity. (T 1.3.10.3 My emphasis)⁸

While Hume is not specifically referring to belief in regards to identity in the above passage, belief works the same for whatever idea is believed. When any idea is believed, that lively idea comes close to the forcefulness and vivaciousness of an impression – as Hume states at T 1.1.11.7, "The lively idea of any object always approaches its impression." Once an idea is believed, it is able to influence the passions on a level equal to that of impressions. It is from the natural propensity of the imagination to flow freely and smoothly between perceptions that we unconsciously (or unreflectively) believe or feel a continuity – and then an identity – of objects. Thus the disconnected impressions appear continuous and unbroken/unchanging.

2.2 Islands of Memory Connected by Bridges of Imagination

In the section on personal identity, Hume argues that memory is the chief – but not only – source of our vulgar notion of personal identity. He argues this because memory is what is primarily needed to bring together past perceptions to form bundles – bundles which make up what we envision to be the self.

Had we no memory, we never shou'd have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person. But having once acquir'd this notion of causation from the memory, we can extend the same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our memory, and can comprehend times, and circumstances, and actions, which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have existed (T 1.4.6.20).

At T 1.1.4 Hume makes it apparent that the relation of cause and effect is very important for the

⁷ Recall that Hume defines belief as, "A lively idea related to or associated with a present impression" (T 1.3.7.5).

⁸ More generally, it seems that belief is able to influence action.

connection or association of ideas. "Tis sufficient to observe, that there is no relation, which produces a stronger connexion in the fancy, and makes one idea more readily recall another, than the relation of cause and effect betwixt their objects" (T 1.1.4.2). In fact, it is through the repeated impressions and memories like those of billiard balls striking each other that we develop an idea of cause and effect.

Given that we have memories, we are able to join together past memories not only to make conclusions about cause and effect and the identity of external objects, but also about personal identity. According to Hume, we "discover" (unconsciously feign) personal identity via the relations among our past and present perceptions in memory – just as we do in "discovering" identity of external objects. In remembering past impressions and ideas, we notice the relations of cause and effect, resemblance, and contiguity. We take notice of the fact that the last impression we remember from yesterday was lying down in bed, and that the first impression we remember of today was awakening in (apparently) that same bed. By having the memory of these two impressions we are able to take notice of the relations between the two sets of impressions – namely resemblance and contiguity. It is in taking notice of the relations amongst impressions/ideas that memory helps piece together a false impression of personal identity with the help of the imagination. "In this view, therefore, memory does not so much produce as discover personal identity, by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions" (T 1.4.6.20).

When we utilize contiguity and resemblance, the imagination has a sufficient number of connections to make the transition from disparate perceptions to the assumption of identity and subsequent belief in identity. When perceptions are contiguous, the imagination easily moves from one perception to another. For example, when I survey my desk in front of me the perceptions are distinct in that they contain first a book, then a computer, then a stack of papers. However, the perceptions are contiguous in their appearance which allows for the imagination to easily join them together. Furthermore, when I then return my gaze to my left and see my book again the book that appears this

second time resembles the book from a moment ago so perfectly that, again, (despite the distinctness of this new impression) the imagination can easily join that prior impression with the present by way of their resemblance. Thus we see that when causation, contiguity, and resemblance are joined with the workings of the imagination, we are able to join together disparate impressions and memories by feigning solid and unbroken connections among them.

The key to what makes our present self resemble our past self(s) is that the self is taken as a *set* of memories. When I look at my present set of memories, that set is sufficiently similar to the set of memories I had yesterday, as well as the set of memories from a week before. The set of memories I have today so closely resembles, and appears contiguous to, the set of memories I had yesterday that I unconsciously or automatically assume they are the same set, just as I assume the tree in the front yard today is the same one from yesterday; i.e. there is an apparent continuity of memory. The assumption of personal identity, in this manner, is the natural or default state for us (the vulgar). When we are *unreflectively* going about our day to day business our imagination naturally and *automatically* joins together objects that resemble one another as well as sets of perceptions that resemble one another. When Hume refers to "personal identity" or the "self" in Book II it is this unreflective notion of self that he is referring to – not the philosophical notion of self that he dismissed earlier in Book I.

3. The Self of Book II: Hume's Redefining of "Self"

Turning to Hume's second notion of identity, I argue that in Book II Hume has continued his discussion of the self using the vulgar (fictional) notion of identity. Towards the end of Part IV, Section VI of Book I, Hume poses a question,

A question naturally arises concerning this relation of identity; whether it be something that really binds our several perceptions together, or only associates their ideas in the imagination. That is, in other words, whether in pronouncing concerning the identity of a person, we observe some real bond among his perceptions or only *feel* one among the ideas we form of them (T 1.4.6.16 My emphasis).

Because, for Hume, the imagination never observes any real connection among objects, we have no

impression of personal identity. Rather, we unreflectively and automatically *feel* that there is a connection among perceptions and thus personal identity is unconsciously feigned. This felt identity depends on resemblance, contiguity, and causation as well as the easy transition of ideas via the imagination (T 1.4.6.16). As Hume states, "...I am *naturally* led to regard the world, as something real and durable, and as preserving its existence, even when it is no longer present to my perceptions." (T 1.4.2.19 my emphasis).

When Hume refers to the self in Book II of the *Treatise* I believe that he is referring to the vulgar notion or conception of the self. That is, he has argued in Book I that there is, strictly (philosophically) speaking, no such thing as personal identity as we do not perceive anything that fits that description (i.e. an unchanging bundle of perceptions); however Hume has also explained that we have an incorrect or unreflective (vulgar) notion of personal identity. Thus in Book II when Hume refers to personal identity he is referring to the feigned impression of personal identity that he has described in Book I. This unreflective and incorrect belief in personal identity is what we are hardwired to have and is what Hume is referring to in Book II (and, in fact, the rest of the *Treatise*). Thus Hume is not contradicting his statements from earlier in the *Treatise* when he spoke of the self. Hume says regarding the objects in the external world,

An object, whose different co-existent parts are bound together by a close relation, operates upon the imagination after much the same manner as one perfectly simple and indivisible, and requires not a much greater stretch of thought in order to its conception. From this similarity of operation we attribute a simplicity to it, and feign a principle of union as the support of this simplicity, and the center of all the different parts and qualities of the object (T 1.4.6.22).

And an important conclusion that Hume draws from the unconsciously feigned impression of identity of external objects,

All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union, as we have already observ'd (T 1.4.6.21).

As we see in the first quote above, we treat the feigned perception of personal identity as if it were not

feigned and even call it "personal identity". That is, when an object's co-existent parts are so closely related the imagination jumps to the conclusion that the object is indivisible and unchanging. But we should take care to notice, as Hume points out in the second quote above, now that he has shown that since our impression of personal identity is unconsciously feigned all arguments about (simple and unchanging) personal identity fall apart insofar as Hume has redefined "personal identity" to mean something other than the philosophical notion – namely the vulgar notion or feeling. Because the imagination easily transitions to an idea of unity, and this is our default state, when we speak of "identity" we must be clear on what definition we are using (either the strict philosophical sense or the vulgar fictional sense). Hume has shown that we do not have personal identity *if* what we take to constitute personal identity is a simple and unchanging self. However, *if* we take personal identity to be a natural belief based on the propensity of the imagination to link distinct perceptions together, we do have that belief that we are simple and unchanging.

So when Hume says the impression of ourselves is always intimately present to us he is referring to the vulgar notion of self as it regards our well being – *not* a self that is simple and unchanging. That is, Hume is talking about our incorrect belief in self. It is this notion of self, I argue, that Hume is working with in Books II and III of the *Treatise*. For those two books it is the feigned notion of self that enlivens our ideas in order to generate sympathy and the passions. It is also this feigned notion of self that self interest (Hume's interested affection) are directed towards, as well as pride and humility.

3.1 Feeling Necessary Connection and Identity

In order to elucidate the similarities between necessary connection and identity we will need recall Hume's discussion of necessary connection. If I am correct in my interpretation, the manner in

⁹ See also T 2.2.4.7. Now this may seem problematic in that Hume seems to now say we have an *impression* of self – something that he has just argued we do not have. We must remember here that in Book II that Hume refers to the vulgar belief in self which includes the belief that we have an impression of self.

which we feign necessary connection is very similar to the way in which we feign identity. Just as the perception of constant conjunction produces a habit of the mind that gives us a feeling we come to call "necessary connection", so does the perception of resembling bundles of idea produces a habit of the mind that gives us a feeling of "self" or "personal identity". Both of these habits and resulting feeling happen even though we have no impression of either. ¹⁰ Hume says of necessary connection,

...as we have no idea, that is not deriv'd from an impression, we must find some impression, that gives rise to this idea of necessity, if we assert we have such an idea. (T 1.3.14.1)

and of the simple self and personal identity,

Unluckily all these positive assertions are contrary to that very existence, which is pleaded for them, nor have we any idea of the self, after the manner it is here explain'd. For from what impression cou'd this idea be deriv'd? (T 1.4.6.2)

We see that in both cases Hume's methodology is the same. Hume is searching for an impression that is the foundation of the respective idea (i.e. necessary connection or identity). Hume finds that in both cases we cannot trace the idea back to an impression. All Hume finds at base in both cases is a feeling.

There is nothing in any objects to perswade us, that they are either always remote or always contiguous; and when from experience and observation we discover, that their relation in this particular is invariable, we always conclude there is some secret cause, which separates or unites them. The same reasoning extends to identity. We readily suppose an object may continue individually the same, tho' several times absent from and present to the senses; and ascribe to it an identity, notwithstanding the interruption of the perception... (T 1.3.2.2)

But if we go any further, and ascribe a power or necessary connexion to these objects; this is what we can never observe in them, but must draw the idea of it from what we *feel* internally in contemplating them (T 1.3.14.27 my emphasis)

I argued earlier in the section that what we have at base regarding identity is a feeling (T 1.4.6.16); likewise we see that Hume holds the same view with necessary connection. Also, just as Hume argues the belief in personal identity is a view of the vulgar, so it is with necessary connection. From this, what Hume concludes for both necessary connection and identity is that both ideas originate in the imagination as feelings (*not* impressions) and are enlivened to become beliefs. Due to the easy transition of the imagination and our belief, we raise both of these ideas up so that they approach the

¹⁰ Loeb also discusses a similarity between causation and personal identity. However, Loeb's discussion focuses on whether causation and personal identity are intrinsic or extrinsic relations and their relations to Hume's worries in the Appendix.

feeling of an impression and it is that feeling that makes these ideas have the motivating power that they do. In the case of both necessary connection and personal identity Hume takes the same methodological approach. Because of the Copy Principle, Hume is looking for an impression that grounds a particular idea (necessary connection or personal identity). In the case of necessary connection and personal identity he cannot find an impression of to ground either idea. Ultimately, what we see that in both cases the propensity of the imagination to join together similar impressions and memories allows us to feign ideas of necessary connection and personal identity.

3.2 Exciting the Passions¹¹

As was stated earlier, because our impressions of interrupted objects so closely resemble uninterrupted objects, the imagination easily flows between impressions and we overlook the fact that the impressions are actually distinct and separable.

'Tis evident, That as the ideas of the several distinct *successive* qualities of objects are united together by a very close relation, the mind, in looking along the succession, must be carry'd from one part of it to another by an easy transition...hence it proceeds, that *any* succession of related qualities is readily consider'd as one continu'd object, existing without variation (T 1.4.3.3 second emphasis mine).

By unconsciously feigning the impression of identity we come to believe that objects and the self are, in fact, identical. It is the *belief* in identity, I argue, that is sufficient for motivating the passions – regardless of the fact that the belief is about a fiction. "As belief is almost absolutely requisite to the exciting our passions, so the passions in their turn are very favourable to belief..." (T 1.3.10.4). Because beliefs are lively ideas – to the point that they closely resemble impressions – they are able to motivate the passions. And not only are beliefs able to move the passions but in doing so, they reinforce the vulgar notion of identity (i.e. the natural belief in identity due to the easy movement of the imagination).

¹¹ Specifically, I am interested here in the passions that actively use an idea of self in their operation (e.g. pride, humility, etc.) where the self plays a necessary role in their operation.

...our identity with regard to the passions serves to corroborate¹² that with regard to the imagination, *by making distant perceptions influence each other*, and by giving us a present concern for our past or future pleasures." (T 1.4.6.19 my emphasis)

Because our notion of self is so strong regarding the passions, that belief/feeling helps strengthen the connections between our disjointed perceptions that the imagination has joined together. That is, identity with regard to the passions *reinforces* the prior work of the imagination. So whereas personal identity in relation to the understanding is feigned by resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect (recall the Book I discussion), the felt/believed notion of self is so effective in influencing the passions that this movement helps strengthen our prior feigned notion of the self as well as our concern for past and future pleasures and pains.

Passions, such as pride, are constituted such that they need an idea of self to function. The passions call attention to and utilize an idea of the self and thus reinforce our belief in self. That is, the movement of the passions helps further our concern for our past and future self in that we continue to appeal to a notion of self in order for the passions to function (i.e. repetitious appeals to the self helps engrain the belief). Thus the constant appeal to or influence of the self regarding the passions helps to bolster the prior belief in self. Ultimately, what happens is a snow-balling effect. The imagination (using resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect) initially allows us to automatically and unconsciously feel personal identity. Then the passions reinforce personal identity by constantly appealing to an idea of self, thus reinforcing our felt notion of self. The vulgar belief in personal identity grows every more lively with each quick movement of the imagination or passion called forth. Ultimately, this idea of self, though a philosophical fiction is able to support the workings of the passions, Humean sympathy, and Hume's morals because it is believed – even by philosophers once they leave their study.

¹² The way "corroborate" is used here is not our present-day usage. Rather, for Hume it meant roughly "to strengthen constitutionally". Cf. Oxford English Dictionary entry. Penelhum also briefly notes the important usage of "corroborate" in "The Self of Book I and the Selves of Book 2" p. 283; there he states that the passions only serve to reinforce the belief in self generated by the understanding.

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