

**IS HUME A SCEPTIC WITH REGARD TO PERSONAL IDENTITY  
AND ONTOLOGY IN GENERAL?**

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In Hume's *Treatise* on human nature, we find an interesting blend of the issues that arise in philosophy of mind, metaphysics, and epistemology. Due to these subjects' close nexus with each other, an individual's position in one subject has instantaneous repercussions for their views in the other respective fields. Hume is primarily a philosopher of mind who tries to render the underlying principles by which the mind forms beliefs about causes, objects, and personal identity. As such, his opinion about the operations of the mind, certainly finds its results in metaphysics and epistemology. This is surely not to say that Hume is a metaphysician or an epistemologist, but his theory of mind forces him to into positions in these relative areas. This paper will reflect the interconnections in these areas.

Metaphysics, broadly construed, attempts to answer questions about the underlying structure of reality, i.e., what objects, causes, and processes exist in the world. Usually, metaphysics is primarily concerned about the world independent of us. But many of the problems that arise concern bridging the perceiver and the world independent of the perceiver. Philosophy of mind comes into play since it is difficult to determine which properties of our perceptions belong to the world and which belong to the perceiver. For instance, when we see and taste an apple, there are several possible assignments of which features of our perceptions belong to the world and/or perceiver. The main three philosophical positions are as follows:

- 1) *Solipsist*: All features of the apple belong to the perceiver.
- 2) *Eliminative Materialist*: All features of the apple belong to the world.
- 3) *Hybrid*: Features like taste, smell, and color belong to the perceiver, and the extension of the apple in space belongs to the world.

Hume begins his philosophical project in *Book I* of the *Treatise*, from the perspective of the solipsist, since he starts with mental route to the philosophical problem of "reality". He is not really concerned with solving this problem by way of formally arguing for *necessary cause*, *substance*, *matter*, or *personal identity*. For Hume, metaphysical problems are too difficult for reason to solve; we have no proper conception of substances or matter independent of us. All we

can ever be sure of are our own perceptions, which, according to Hume, alone do not yield us an external world.

Moreover, Hume's scepticism in *Bk. I* of the *Treatise* even leads him to doubt a more fundamental science in philosophy than metaphysics—ontology. Ontology is a more basic subsience of metaphysics—without it, metaphysics could not exist. Ontological commitments are commitments about the basic things that exist: what makes a thing a thing, in general. Metaphysics then tries to go about trying to discover how these things are connected together. It is important to note that, in *Bk. I*, Hume is too sceptical that even our basic conception of things in general is empty, and cannot, therefore, be demonstrated by formal argumentation. So as a result, not only does the external world get a good share of Occum's razor, but so does personal identity. In regard to ontology, or what makes a thing a thing, Hume is concerned about the conundrum of reconciling identity with diversity of an object or at least the perception of it. The ontological side of the problem of reconciling the distinctness and togetherness of sensory perception is expressed by Hume as follows:

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 connection among distinct existences*. Did our perceptions either inhere in something simple and individual, or did the mind perceive some real connexion among them, there wou'd be no difficulty in this case. For my part, I must plead the privilege of a sceptic, and confess, that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding (Appendix [NN 400]).

This is a serious puzzle, and Hume is at a loss as to how we can speak of perceptions themselves as things, ontologically, and how they are united in the mind, metaphysically. He does concede to not being able to solve this problem, and pleads the privilege of the sceptic. Let me give an illustration of the nature of the problem. Suppose that we perceive a cup of coffee for a duration of five minutes. We can imagine that we have seen five cups for each minute. There were five series of perceptions over time. We can also divide time even further into seconds with respect to each minute, and on *ad infinitum*. So the question is how many cups do we actually have; one, five, sixty, and so on. If we cannot answer this question, then we simply cannot call a

thing a thing because what, of course, makes it one simple thing? Hume states: “But all my hopes vanish when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness. I cannot discover any theory, which gives me satisfaction on this head” [Appendix 400].

The same puzzle resurfaces in personal identity. Hume argues that:

The mind is a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity (T.I.4.6, 165).

I will argue that Hume pleads the sceptic only because things like a unified self, and independent simple substances are not cognitive objects due to the puzzles aforementioned. Reason simply cannot solve these ontological and metaphysical problems. But I will also argue that Hume does not merely leave us at this point, for he says that the metaphysical problem is not “absolutely insuperable” (Appendix [NN 400]). He then goes on to explain the imagination’s propensity to form beliefs about *substance*, *identity*, and *self*. I think that Hume actually believes in a self and an external world. He arrives at them, however, by not by *a priori* or logical demonstration, but rather, by rendering a psychology of belief based on a strong inclination of the mind to believe in these entities.

Accordingly, we cannot conclusively prove that there is a self nor independent objects. But we just have overwhelming evidence that some things exist, or at least some more so than others do. We find, then, that Hume has very high standards for knowledge of ourselves and the things around us. Nonetheless, it is safe to say that we have good justification for believing more or less in them. In this regard, he has placed himself into the category of a soft evidentialist.

In II, we will layout Hume’s psychological route to personal identity and how he attempts to locate the source of our belief in a self. In III, I will defend Hume and argue that, although psychological questions may ultimately rest on a science of ontology, Hume can get away with his project, by holding on to unity *via* mental processes. My argument is that the velocity of the

imagination is the catalyst which makes it *evident* that perceptions of the mind are unified. Some of our sense experience is just given to us in a unified appearance, due to the closeness of the succession of some species of perceptions. Surely this alone does not give us a license to call a thing a thing, for Hume. It just looks that way, and we are justified and incline to say so without being able to prove it conclusively by formal demonstration. With his principles for how the mind associates ideas, Hume does give us a *psychological account* of how we form that belief in the union among perceptions. We will see that the *velocity by which the mental processes synchronizes experience, via the imagination*, works well because it is essential in being the source of our belief in the type of unity that we allow us to speak of things as things, in so far as the rapidity of mind makes this evident. I will give a few intuitive illustrations to show how in some cases we are more inclined to call a thing a thing and some cases where we would be less inclined. We will now take a look at the beginnings of his constructive theory of how the mind gives us this propensity.

## II

He tells us at the beginning of his discussion about scepticism concerning the senses that we are allowed to ask the question of “what causes induce us to believe in the existence of body”. But we cannot ask “Whether there be body or not? (T.I.4.2, 125). Here, Hume sets the delimitations for inquiry, thereby “setting aside the metaphysical question of the identity of a thinking substance” (T.I.4.2, 127). Since Hume is not willing to commit himself to a simple substance in this way, and at the same time deny real-world-connections, in his sceptical analysis of necessary connection, he ends up in what seems to be a chaotic world of distinct impressions which just happen to find themselves together most of the time. Hume is not interested in why they are together, i.e., what kind of substance do they inhere, or what is it out there in the world that connects them. Hume’s project is merely psychological. Hume’s discussion of personal identity is primarily built on the major role in which the imagination plays in the formation of belief, in general. From this formation of belief in general, we arrive at belief in *causes*,

*continu'd existence, substance, and then on to personal identity.* In Hume's account of the source of our beliefs, he attempts to show the psychological "manner in which" we form our beliefs. He attempts to show the mental processes at work with respect to how we form our beliefs with sensory experience being the very foundation. To give a glimpse of this, Hume contrasts belief, or assent to a matter of fact, with unbelief, or denial of a matter of fact. The main difference is that belief has a much greater psychological status than unbelief. Greater psychological status for Hume simply means a greater effect on the mind. Hume writes. "An idea assented to *feels* different from a fictitious idea, that the fancy alone presents to us: And this different feeling I endeavor to explain by calling it a superior *force, or vivacity, or solidity, or firmness, or steadiness*" (T.I.3.7, 68).

To illustrate, when we see an actual white horse, the shape and color of the horse is "lively". But if we turn our heads away from the horse, we can still imagine the horse without actually seeing it. But the image is less forceful since it is a mere idea and not an impression. We are also free to think of the horse as a unicorn. But this idea has even less force and vivacity since it is farther removed from the actual impression of the horse.

Hume bifurcates perceptions of the mind into impressions and ideas. Impressions are derived from sense experience and have the highest psychological status, for they "enter with the most force and violence" (T.I.1.1). Ideas, on the other hand, are copies of impressions and are weaker in force and vivacity. Hume then states a fundamental principal of human nature: "...that all our simple ideas in their first appearance are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent" (T.I.1.1). Simple impressions are simply sense data such as, color, shape, taste, sound, and touch. These are the raw materials of sensory information. These raw materials, or simple impressions, are bundled together by the imagination, according to the Hume's principles of association. The bundle theory of perception is what yields us complex ideas of concrete objects like apples, tables, and chairs. The complex idea of a table is not an exact copy of a table as if the table itself was provided by the senses. The

table that we believe we perceived is actually a result of a rapid bundling of its color, size, shape, texture, and so forth.

The grouping by the imagination of simple ideas into complex ideas takes place according to the following principles of association: (1) *Resemblance*, (2) *Degrees of Qualities*, (3) *Quantitative Proportions*, (4) *Contrariety*, (5) *Identity*, (6) *Space and Time*, and (7) *Causation*. Hume states that the first four relations are objects of knowledge and certainty. That is, they are “pronounced at first sight, without any enquiry or reasoning” (T.I.3.1, 50). These first four relations can be said to be “more deeply” rooted in the specific objects of impressions than the last three. We could even say that they are more forceful principle of association than the last three. This is because relations like causation, although sometimes more or less immediate, are somewhat removed from the specific objects of the senses. Beliefs in causes, identity, location, and time, therefore, are less forceful and lively. Hume states, for instance, that “there is nothing in any objects to persuade us, that they are either always remote or contiguous” (T.I.3.2, 53).

And again he states (T.I.3.2, 55):

When I cast my eye on the *known qualities* of objects, I immediately discover that the relation of cause and effect depends not in the least on *them*. When I consider their relations, I can find none but those of contiguity and succession; which I already regarded as imperfect and unsatisfactory.

For Hume, if we never had the *relation-oriented* principles of association, we could never get beyond our actual or occurrent impressions. The other principles of association are specifically known in the sense data itself, and hence *object-oriented*. The imagination has to do some work behind the scenes in order to arrive at beliefs concerning causes, location (space), time, and identity; for, actual causes, location, time, and identity, are not to be found necessarily in nature, or more precisely, sense experience. So *beliefs* about these concepts are the concern for Hume. Beliefs in continued existence, substance, identity, are all identity-relations rendered by the imagination. According to Hume, the senses do not provide them directly.

The ontological problems that concern Hume, especially the one which we previously mentioned, force him into this train of thought. For instance, the cup of coffee we mentioned in the introduction illustrates Hume's move from rejecting a cognitive-ontological account of thinghood, to a psychological account. To recall, Hume thinks that we cannot say that the cup of coffee is a unified substance, due to the fact that, if we view the cup for any time interval, say five minutes, a *succession* of perceptions has occurred, one after another. So is it one cup of coffee or are there actually five cups for each five-minute time interval, or sixty for each minute, and so on?

The imagination, with great *Propensity*, connects the *Resemblances* among impressions, even when interrupted, into a unity. And this unity gives rise to the illusion of *Identity*. It should be pointed out that the identity engendered by the imagination is *not* an actual identity. Since perceptions are distinct and independent (not of the mind), they will not allow us to say, "an object is the same with itself" (T.I.4.2, 133). Unity is a mere association of ideas based on the *Resemblance* of objects, not their *Identity*. So, Hume writes: "But as the smooth passage of our thought along our perceptions make us ascribe to them an identity, we can never without reluctance yield up that opinion" (T.I.4.2, 137). This yielding, though, is a *feigning* of identity, by the imagination.

Of course, as there is less resemblance among our successive perceptions, the imagination has to do more work in feigning this identity. In regard to the simple self, substance and its independent existence, a *feigning* takes place because the tension between unity and diversity is resonant here again. Objects are diverse due to change. That is, we experience variation in the qualities of objects all of the time. But in the end, we still posit that the object, changed throughout time, is that same object. There are countless examples. One such example is Descartes' piece of wax. To ease this tension, "the imagination feigns something unknown and invisible, which it supposes to continue the same under all these variations; and this unintelligible something it calls" a *self*, *substance*, or *original* and *first matter* (T.I.4.3, 146).

What I have said so far pertains to objects of sense experience in general. But, for Hume, it also applies to *personal identity*, as well. Hume's reluctance to call a thing a thing applies to the self as well. Setting aside ontological/metaphysical difficulties, Hume states:

I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perceptual flux and movement" (T.I.4.6. 165).

And again, about the mind, Hume states:

There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in a different; whatever natural propensity we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre [of perceptions] must not mislead us. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, which it is composed (T.I.4.6, 165).

In regard to the self, Hume is building on what he has argued earlier. First, with *Causes*, we do not perceive them directly. Sense data do not give us necessary causal connections, among the datum, but merely sense objects. We just see two billiard balls in motion, colliding with one another, without perceiving the cause. True, the first billiard ball was temporally prior to the second, but priority in time does not grant us necessary causation.

Likewise, with respect to *Identity*, we do not perceive it directly in any object either. And since we cannot find it in *any* object, we cannot find it in a *self*. It is simply inferred, for Hume, on the basis of the bundle or brute conjunction of perceptions. It is therefore, fictitious—with so much diversity in sense experience, we cannot arrive at something simple. Of what unites this diversity, i.e., whether the mind or something out there in the world unites them, Hume asks:

But, as, notwithstanding this distinction and separation [of perceptions], we suppose the whole train of perceptions to be united by identity a question 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?

Hume believes that his theory of mind “proves” that the bond among perceptions is a feeling and not a cognitive object. The principle of *Resemblance* is going to be doing a great deal work in producing the evidence, *via* the imagination, for our *inference* that there are things such as a

simple self and substances. In the last section, I will defend Hume's project and show that he is not a radical sceptic, but rather, he is a soft evidentialist. I show this by laying out the dynamics of how mental processes make it evident that things exist, such as a self, perceptions, and at least some external world, underlying our private experience.

### III

One may wonder if it is even possible to render a psychology of substance and personal identity, without some minimal level of ontological commitment. It seems an odd and expensive way for Hume to absolve himself of *all* ontological commitments. For example, if we strip substance of all its extraneous features such as "first matter" or "substratum", it is simply a simple thing. When we translate substance into thinghood, it seems that Hume has to be committed to something metaphysically. Some possible existences are a conscious mind with the occurrences of perception; or sense data alone; or sense data inhering in some independent external substance. To deny this is worse than the regress into solipsism; for, we end up using language to talk about things but we are not willing to say that things exist. This sounds absurd.

However, I do want to grant Hume his epistemic rights, and perhaps, some legitimacy to his project. His investigation into the dynamics of mental processes is quite ingenious. He has come up with some exceptional principles of the mind, especially for anyone who is willing to escape metaphysics and ontology. But due to the aforementioned absurdity, it seems that thinghood has to be preserved somehow, or at least to a greater extent. I think that Hume does actually believe in a self and an external world, but he just arrives at them in a different way.

What has happened is that Hume has remarkably "slowed" the mental-world clock. Everything is sort of divided into time-slices. But the *velocity at which the mind works*, in a sense, somehow preserves the unity of thinghood, however, only by making it evident that there is such a unity. I will discuss Hume's psychological argument in a bit more detail and provide a few more illustrations to make it clearer.

Hume accounts for the problem of reconciling the “sameness” of a sense object/s with its diversity, by the principle of *Resemblance*. Every minute of our perceiving the cup, the least we can say is that the perceptions *resemble* one another, although we cannot say that there is one unified and simple cup.

Notice too, that the degree of resemblance between sense impressions varies from one experience to another. When we perceive a cup for any duration of time, the succession of resembling perceptions has a very close nexus with each other. Hume goes on trying to show how we *form* the belief in continued and external existence *a’ la* imagination. We attribute existence to objects of perception due to the perception’s *constancy* and *coherence*. An example of *constancy* that Hume gives is “my bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner, and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them” (T.I.4.2, 130). Objects of the senses are *coherent* when they change but the changes are hardly noticeable; as for instance, when after I leave my room and return an hour later to find the fire is not exactly the same as when I left. But I am nonetheless accustomed to saying that the fire is the same fire. *Constancy* and *Coherence* are, fundamentally, *Resemblances* among sense perceptions or objects of impressions.

It is very important to note that Hume arrives at things by way of mental processes. The lens through which we should interpret Hume is that of “mental-events” as opposed to “ontological-states”. So the perceived cup of coffee which we have been mentioning heretofore, is a mental-event, contrary to the cup as existing in as state of being a cup. Of course, there are some semantical difficulties here. But as long as we keep in mind that constant flux of perceptions we experience belong to our minds, and actual states belong to the external world. Hume’s strategy is that we begin with sense experience, and thus, we are forced to look at things in terms of mental-events.

*Constancy* is a quality of *resemblance* that has to do with the rapidity of these mental-events, whereas *Coherence* is a more general quality of the *resemblance* relation that we among

various sensory objects. These two qualities vary in degrees. An example the varying degrees of *constancy* can be seen by imagining a blinking street signal. Hume would say that *constancy* of a perceptual event is like a blinking street signal. As the light blinks faster and faster, we are more inclined to say that the series of flashes is one event, with each increment. Suppose the light gradually blinks faster to the point of remaining on. Hume would say this is about the highest level of *constancy* that we can ever perceive. Since we are looking at perception in terms of events, we could say that the blink/events are so rapid that it is easier for the mind to conceive of the one light as one light being on, and hence the series holds together so tightly that it looks as if there is only one event—the light constantly remaining on. But may not be the case that the light is one event as such. It's just that the blinking light's gradual increased frequency is so inconceivably fast, that it just looks more evident that the flashing of the signal light is one event. The imagination has an easier job to do in forming the belief in the unity of the series. The whole series of flashes hold together in the imagination more easily. But if the street signal flashed only once on two different days, it is hard to conceive of the series as one event.

See also, that there is more *coherence* when there is more *constancy*. *Coherence*, though, is a more general feature of resemblance and applies better to very heterogeneous events, notwithstanding constancy's important relevance. To exemplify, let's imagine the heterogeneous *Event\** of me drinking a cup of coffee. *Event\** includes the following conjunctions of mini-events *e1* through *e4*.

- e1*: I touch the cup.
- e2*: I pick the cup up.
- e3*: I tilt the cup ( $x$ ), then ( $x + 1$ ), then ( $x + 2$ ), then ( $x + \dots$ ) degrees toward my mouth.
- e4*: I swallow the coffee.

Each of the mini-events is conceivably different and distinct. The velocity at which I perform the whole series of mini-events, makes *Event\**—the drinking of the cup of coffee—more *coherent*. Velocity, then, has a unifying effect on *Event\**. But one may ask, how does Hume's *inference-oriented* principles come into play? As events are more distant from one

another, the imagination comes into play and has to make an extra effort to make inferences about the identity of an event. Suppose *e1* and *e4* occurred an hour away from each other. The imagination has a more difficult time positing unity to the event; it has to do more *feigning* in more distant successions of events. Consider also, a baseball game that has been interrupted by a rain delay and resumes after two days. It seems more likely as if there were actually two games. This is to say that, it is more difficult to imagine that the official game is actually one game. Perhaps the mental and physical states of the players have changed. And maybe the physical environment has possibly changed as well.

There are, of course, problems that surface. For instance, one might be confused at certain points about whether it is actually the *velocity of the mind* or the *imagination* itself that is the thing doing the unifying. It will suffice to say that the imagination operates at a higher velocity, and is more or less out of our control, as sensory events occur at faster speeds; but only as they become more distant, the imagination becomes more languid, and “we” sort of take over in its employment. Hume acknowledges that the mind makes smooth transitions among some objects (T.I.4.3, 145). And given the variety cases covered by his theory, we would have to assume that he is aware of the varying degrees of velocity of the imagination. Nothing precludes these transitions from occurring at infinite speeds. In the case of infinite speeds between objects, the sensory experience is simply given to us in that manner. The speeds at which they occur makes it so evident that the sensory event is a thing, that we cannot help believe so, or at least we have a powerful disposition toward that belief. It is a brute fact that some species of sense experience are given to us in this manner. Similarly, a jury does not decide what raw evidence is to be admitted into a trial. Rather, the judge decides and the jury evaluates on that which has been given.

Hume states, that higher resembling perceptions “succeed each other with an *inconceivable rapidity*, and are in a perceptual flux and movement” (T.I.4.6, 165: *Emphasis mine*). At a second place, he says that simplicity of substances is conceived by the imagination

“at once, with facility, by a single effort of thought, without change or variation” (T.I.43, 146). But then notice that he does not allow “simplicity in at one time”, nor “identity [in a different time]” (Ibid.). This latter restriction takes into account the ontological problem of reconciling identity with the diversity of perceptual experience.

The problem cannot be solved for Hume. However, mental-events and processes make it evident that tables and chairs are simply tables and chairs. I think that Hume does believe that there is some underlying world behind our perceptions of tables and chairs. What he believes that world specifically to be—tables and chairs, atoms, or something divine—is questionable. But he begins with our mental processes. We arrive at personal identity in the same way. The reason why I spent so much time on general events and things, is because, for Hume, they are inextricably linked to how we arrive at the self. Just as we have evidence for believing that there is something behind our perceptions which we do not perceive, so we have evidence that there is a self, due to the *apparent* union or conjunction among sense data. We do not perceive this self directly, though.

To conclude, as a philosopher of mind, Hume looks into the dynamics of the psychological processes at work in the formation of belief. His critical arguments against metaphysics and his principles of association go hand in hand. He attempts to tear down a Mansion, but does not leave the rubble thereafter. Hume clears the way for a more smaller comfortable house. In this way he reconciles being a philosopher and common person, by forming himself into a hybrid of both. The two parts of the imagination reflect this hybrid. The active imagination is that of the philosopher, who recognizes the existing metaphysical/ontological problems, and that perceptions are different from independent objects; and so, he is reluctant to posit any self or substance. But the passive/dependent imagination is that of common folk, who just cannot help but believe in *Thinghood*, and hence, *a Self*. The common person has lower standards for knowledge and is not aware of the philosophical problems of “reality”. But as a philosopher, Hume recognizes our epistemic limitations, yet

renders a theory of mind which prevents him from being a full-blown sceptic—who says we can know nothing, *nor* have any justification for anything. Instead, Hume places himself more on the side of justification than knowledge.

I say he is a soft evidentialist because a strict evidentialist theorizes justification by formulating necessary epistemic principles for aiming at truth. One such principle is to necessarily base our views on fitting or proper evidence. Here, the notion of epistemic duty is introduced into the equation. However, Hume is a soft evidentialist; in that, although he would not say we have an epistemic duty to believe certain assertions, some assertions are more *natural* to believe than others. This is especially so, when experience renders itself in such a way as to make us more inclined to believe its testimony. For Hume, the self and the external world are not cognitive objects, but are produced by the quasi-esoteric operations of the mind, from which we can later on posit the rest of the world, more or less on the evidence of sensory information.

What is it though that lay behind the veil of our perceptions? It is difficult to say what things of which Hume would affirm their existence. But in my understanding of Hume, he certainly would affirm that there is a *self*, *other minds*, and at least some *external world* behind the veil of our private perceptual experience.