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Précis of Hume's Difficulty: Time and Identity in the TREATISE

Despite its central role in his important theories of self and external world, Hume's account of numerical identity has been neglected or misunderstood. The account is designed as a response to a difficulty concerning identity apparently original with Hume. I argue that the problem is real, crucial, and remains unresolved today.

Hume's response to the difficulty enlists his idiosyncratic, empiricist views on time: time consists of discrete, partless moments, some of which coexist with successions of others. Time is more like a wall of variously sized bricks than like a continuous line. Hume's arguments that time (and space) are not infinitely divisible have met with literal contempt. I show that his unusual views are motivated and consistent.

The topic of identity leads naturally to Hume's account of personal identity and his later retraction--one of the most widely discussed topics in Hume scholarship. I give a new, straightforward explanation of the retraction, by arguing that Hume's views on consciousness preclude his prior account of the self as a fiction. I then suggest that Hume's fundamental problem for personal identity is his general difficulty concerning identity.

Discussing Hume's metaphysics raises perhaps the most central and difficult topic in Hume scholarship--how to reconcile the constructive, theoretical Hume with the skeptical Hume. The prevailing view for the last century has been that Hume's skepticism is limited, leaving room for his theorizing. I argue, rather, that Hume is an unlimited Pyrrhonian skeptic in relevant respects, and that this interpretation of him best reconciles his two sides.

The critics discuss three of these topics; on those I focus here.

Hume's Difficulty

Sometimes we wonder whether or not two things are numerically identical, or, less paradoxically, whether something and something are. In the relevant case, we are sufficiently acquainted with each something to be able to represent it to ourselves. Consider someone whose aspect greatly changes with his emotional state. You first saw him glowering in a faculty meeting, and later had a cheerful conversation with him as a new neighbor, without realizing you were twice gaining acquaintance with one person. Each acquaintance was sufficient for being able to think about *him*, whether grimly or genially. When you begin to wonder whether the dour faculty member is the friendly neighbor, you are wondering about him.

When wondering about something we are able to imagine the alternatives. In our representations we can pick out things in the world, and we can portray them as being ways that they may or may not be. Such portrayals are not always just a matter of representing the things as having various characteristics. If, say, for distinct things we imagine them to be identical, then we imagine there to be, to exist, some one thing that they are. So representing-as can include what I'm calling representing-there-as-being.

When you wonder whether professor and neighbor are identical or not, you are able to imagine each possibility, and are able to switch from one to the other. But how can you keep the professor fixed as the same person and the neighbor fixed as the same person when you consider these alternate possibilities? First you conceive them as identical--as one person-- then switch to conceiving that person you represent there as being as the same persons as distinct people. But then you represent there as being someone distinct from himself. Going in the other direction, first you represent there as being distinct persons, then switch to conceiving these two as the same person as a single person. But then you represent there as being distinct persons identical with each other. Either way, you apparently represent there as being an obvious absurdity. But you do not really. So how are you able to represent there as being some things that are perhaps numerically identical and perhaps numerically distinct? This is Hume's Difficulty.

Hume's account of the idea of identity as "a medium betwixt unity and number" is his response. The idea must be the idea of something that is a single thing, viewed one way, and is many distinct things, viewed another. Only our idea of time, with attendant ideas and a fiction, provides the necessary materials for such a medium, he thinks, so the idea of identity is an idea of identity through time. The key temporal notions are those of steadfast object, and of something with duration.

Something with duration is really several distinct single things in succession. A steadfast object is a single thing that is not a succession, but that coexists with a succession. The fiction is that of taking everything to have duration. The idea of identity is the idea of a steadfast object, recognized as such, yet with duration, recognized as such. In acquiring this idea we avoid obvious contradiction by alternately viewing the relevant object as steadfast, and as successive. In other words, we alternately view it as a single thing, and as many distinct things. However, this alternation just hides the contradiction without removing it.

Consciousness and self

In an appendix, Hume finds a problem with his account of coming to believe in personal identity. My diagnosis is that in his earlier account he took too seriously the analogy with his account of coming to believe in continued and distinct existence, i.e., body. Central to belief in body was coming up with the idea that there was something unperceived that made true the natural, unavoidable attribution of identity to interrupted, exactly resembling perceptions--interrupted, so manifestly distinct. We invented the fiction that they were the same thing sometimes unperceived, to relieve the tension of believing that they were both distinct and identical. In the case of acquiring the idea of self, we reflect on a train of past perceptions. There is no interruption in this case, but there is clear variation and so distinctness. Nonetheless, the close relation between the members of the succession again unavoidably makes us take them to be the same thing. And again, to relieve tension, we invent a fiction to "disguise the variation," a fiction that there is something internal that makes it true that the distinct perceptions are the same

thing--"soul, and self, and substance" (1.4.6.6).¹ This move worked in the case of body because the body was to exist at times unperceived. Since the identity we unavoidably attributed seemed precluded by what we were aware of, it must have been a matter of something we were not always aware of. If the account of acquiring the idea of self is going to work, the same will have to be true: since what we are aware of--the perceptions--are manifestly distinct, their identity must be due to something we are not always aware of. However, the introspective methodology of the Treatise depends on the accurate reflection of the mind by consciousness. Nothing internal can be hidden from consciousness, so the fiction of an internal principle of identity for the perceptions would be too obviously false.

Skepticism and epistemic merit

It seems odd for a self-professed skeptic to address issues in metaphysics. This oddity is part of a more general problem how Hume can consistently be committed to views he is skeptical about. My solution takes inspiration from Frede's interpretation of Sextus.² To understand Hume we need to distinguish two kinds of assent: active endorsement of a view as true for reasons recognized to be good, vs. passive acquiescence in a view forced upon one by appearances. Think of the former as belief held because it meets genuine epistemic norms, and the latter as mere conjecture one is caused to make independent of epistemic norms. Like Sextus, Hume is a skeptic both in never finding sufficiently good reason for active endorsement, and in nonetheless passively acquiescing in views for purposes of action. Unlike Sextus, Hume extends this skeptical approach into theoretical matters beyond active daily life. He notes that the causal force of a view may vary. Imitating Carneades, Hume weighs the causal force with which opposing views on a theoretical issue strike him, and acquiesces in the stronger with a degree of assent diminished in proportion to the strength of the weaker. The theoretical goal is to hit

¹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), cited by (book.part.section.paragraph).

² Michael Frede, "The Skeptic's Two Kinds of Assent and the Question of the Possibility of Knowledge," in *Essays in Ancient Philosophy* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), 201-22.

upon views that, through the ages and across cultures, will come to dominate-stable views such as, Hume thought, those found in Euclidean geometry and
Newtonian mechanics. Hume hoped his science of the mind, including his views in
metaphysics, likewise had such causal force.

A way to clarify Hume's Pyrrhonian approach is to see him as relying on two senses of convincingness: normative convincingness and causal convincingness. Considerations in favor of a view are normatively convincing if they ultimately provide good reason to endorse the view. Considerations in favor of a view are causally convincing if they causally impel one to accept the view. Hume goes further by relying on two senses of normative convincingness: epistemological and practical. Considerations in favor of a view are epistemologically convincing if they make it more likely that the view is true. Considerations are practically convincing if, independently of making it more likely that the view is true, they make it more conducive to one's interest or pleasure to accept the view as true.

In a nutshell, Hume's position is that he finds nothing epistemologically convincing, finds many things causally convincing, and finds many of these practically convincing. "[A]ll the rules of logic require a continual diminution, and at last a total extinction of belief and evidence." Yet Nature causes me to conclude some things, nonetheless (1.4.1.6-8). "Tis a gross illusion to suppose, that our resembling perceptions are numerically the same; and 'tis this illusion, which leads us into the opinion that these perceptions are uninterrupted, and are still existent, even when they are not present to the senses." "Carelessness and in-attention," however, suffice for the opinion to be causally convincing (1.4.2.56-57). "Thus there is a direct and total opposition betwixt our reason and our senses. . . " (1.4.5.15). All we usually do is "successively assent to both" and in so doing "knowingly embrace a manifest contradiction" (1.4.7.4). We are caused to embrace an epistemologically unconvincing contradiction.

It does no good to insist that these beliefs have epistemic merit and that their only defect is being unsupported. They are not merely unsupported; there are good arguments against holding them. Yet, Hume is no negative dogmatist. He does not actively endorse as reasonable the claim that he has no reasonable beliefs, since that

is self-defeating (1.4.1.12). He merely acquiesces in that claim until Nature takes over and it slips his mind. The objections "admit of no answer and produce no conviction" (EHU 12.15 n32).³

Note that the objections are not manifestations of an overheated brain. That malady is the rejection of "all belief and reasoning" (1.4.7.8), and is caused by trying to *answer* the objections. The cure is to overlook them. But how ought one to proceed? In answer Hume provides the Title Principle, as Garrett has termed it. But look at the context: "If I must be a fool, as all those who reason or believe any thing *certainly* are, my follies shall at least be natural and agreeable." Following the Title Principle is just a way of indulging ourselves (1.4.7.10-11). The principle expresses the practical normative convincingness of various things that we find causally, though not epistemically, convincing.

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³ David Hume, *An Enquiry concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Tom L. Beauchamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000), cited by (section.paragraph).