Defending Hume’s Theory of Personal Identity and Discarding the Appendix

Lasse Nielsen

Since his contribution to the field of personal identity in 1738 Hume’s theory has been debated thoroughly. Throughout the years there have been multiple critiques of Hume’s theory, but despite the fact that all of these generally appear unsatisfactory, Hume’s theory of personal identity is far from being a popular one in the field. I believe the blame partly falls on Hume himself. Hume’s appendix to Treaties is most often read as expressing a deep concern regarding his own theory, and this concern, I believe, is to blame for his theory never gaining the respect it deserves. After all, why should we listen to Hume if he himself found his theory lacking? It is however a mistake to judge Hume’s theory of personal identity, based on the appendix to Treaties. The appendix is far too ambiguity for any real conclusion and it offers nothing that cannot be found in the original chapter on personal identity from Treaties.

Keywords: Personal identity, the self, the appendix to Treaties, bundle theory, intuition.

1. Introduction

Hume’s contribution to the field of personal identity has never gained the attention it deserves, but it is hard to put a finger on exactly why. In this paper I will attempt to offer an explanation as to why Hume’s theory has been ignored. I will do so by arguing that Hume’s theory involves many elements which may seem counter intuitive at first glance. The arguments against Hume I will present in this paper will come mainly from the pages of Reid’s Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man, and I will show, relying heavily on the work by Harry Lesser (1978)[1], that each of these arguments fail to do damage to Hume’s theory. I will also argue that Hume himself bear some blame in the matter. With the writing of the appendix Hume casts doubt upon his own theory, a doubt which to this day, is still debated. I will argue that the continuous debate over the content of the appendix has served to sideline Hume’s theory of personal identity and taken us down a wrong path. I will offer examples of three different readings of the appendix from Pears, Swain and Ellis, in order to show just how hard, it is to decode Hume’s appendix and how easy it is to find evidence for different reading. I will conclude that we ought to abandon Hume’s appendix and focus on the main body of text about personal identity from Treaties.

1.2 An overview of Hume’s theory of Personal Identity

Below will be a short overview of Hume’s theory of personal identity. This theory is complex and I offer this overview only as a guide to the reader, as I will be drawing upon Hume’s theory throughout the text.

Before beginning however, it is important to note that for Hume, identity is seen as a strict numerical one to one relation, what he calls “perfect identity”. For Hume perfect identity holds
between a perception and an object if that perception is unchanging and uninterrupted. This means that Hume would argue that many of the objects that we would normally prescribe a perfect identity to, are in fact, imperfect since the slightest change would interrupt our perception.[2] As we shall see later, it is because of our inability to have any unchanging and uninterrupted perceptions through time, that Hume eventually ends up concluding that identity is an illusion.

Before we look at Hume’s theory of personal identity, let us first turn to Hume’s theory of identity in general. In Treaties, where we find the entirety of Hume’s work on the subject, Hume starts off by investigating where we get this notion of identity from. He does so by looking at how we come to find the notion of identity.[3] Hume argues that looking at one object can never give us the idea of identity but only that of unity. For there to by identity we would need something to reference our object to, we would need something else, another object. This leads Hume to look at the idea of numbers, but concludes that an idea of numbers alone would also be insufficient to convey identity, as it would make us think that we are looking at different objects, not at the same object. This poses a problem. Now we have an idea of unity and one of numbers but neither of these can give us an idea of identity. This line of thought leads Hume to conclude that the idea of identity must lie somewhere between unity and numbers. Seeing an object gives us the idea of unity, seeing the same object again, at another time, gives us the idea of numbers, the idea of identity allows us to link the idea of unity with that of numbers, and tells us that we are viewing the same object. This means that the idea of identity is not one we form based on the senses, but one we construct in the mind.

Now that we have clarified where the idea of identity come from, we can move on to see how Hume views personal identity.

It is especially the notion of a persistent self which makes Hume question our idea of personal identity. We change all the time, yet we are said to remain the same, how can this be? It must be because of a self which is constant, but despite great effort, Hume cannot seem to find such a thing. “It must be some one impression, that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos’d to have a reference.”[4] Gaining an idea of something unchanging, from perceiving a subject (ourselves) which is in constant change, is to Hume an impossibility. Every time we look into ourselves in order to find an unchanging continuous self, we are presented with different fleeting perceptions “Pain and pleasure, grief and joy”[5] and one cannot form an idea of a self, based on multiple perceptions. To gain an idea of something unchanging, we would have to have an impression of something unchanging, which is impossible. “If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariably the same, thro’ the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos’d to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeed each other, and never all exist at the same time. It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is deriv’d; and consequently there is no such idea.”[6] What there is, Hume concludes, is not a self, but a bundle of perceptions, ever fleeting, popping up and being replaced by other perceptions. According to Hume, a perception exists when it is present to the senses. This means that when we remember something we have viewed in the past, we are pulling perceptions back into our attention. Yet if these perceptions resemble the perception of something now being viewed, we are prone to think them the same perception, when in fact they are not. It is this reasoning that leads Hume to the conclusion that identity cannot be derived from reason but must be derived from the imagination. Hume thus claim that the identity we prescribe ourselves cannot be a perfect one because we are never the same perception, unchanging and uninterrupted, but quite the opposite. It is therefore impossible to have sameness over time, numerical or otherwise.

So why do we have this idea of a self if it cannot come from any one perception? Why do we see any object as a continuous existence? Hume digs deeper and uncovers that this illusion of identity is
brought about by two different concepts namely resemblance and causation. Starting with resemblance Hume argues that when we perceive ourselves or another, we form a perception of what we see, this perception can, and often does, resemble one we have had before. Remembering this past perception and its resemblance to the present one, creates an easy transition of perceptions between the two perceptions, tricking us into thinking we are seeing a continued existence. “Nothing is more apt to make us mistake one idea for another, than any relation betwixt them, which associate them together in the imagination, and makes it pass with faculty from one to the other.”[7] In other words; our past perceptions are brought forth by memory because they resemble our present perception, producing the illusion that we are viewing the same person or object as at a previous time. Even the act of observation is subject to this trickery of the mind. Viewing an object for an extended period of time, I will assume that I am viewing a continuous object, an object that does not change, yet this is merely brought forth by my mind because the perceptions and ideas I form in the viewing process appear so closely together, I assume that my viewing is a continuous action, but in reality it is a series of related objects viewed so closely together as to fool my mind. Think of a light which seems to shine as a continuous source of illumination, yet when one gets closer, one sees that what one thought was a continuous light, was in fact a series of closely related flashed.

On causation Hume writes that if certain perceptions follow each other enough times, we come to assume that they are linked, and that one produces the other. Yet each perception is, according to Hume, a separate and isolated existence[8]. Because the gap between cause and effect is so minute between our perceptions, we fail to see them as multiple perception and mistakenly assume that they are in fact one continuous perception, but this is only a trick of the mind, breaching gaps between perceptions to create the illusion of identity. An example of this could be when we view ourselves and assume that we are witnessing a single perception of our self. What is in fact happening is that our imagination is bridging many perceptions together because they usually follow one another.

The same is here true for objects; Hume argues that because of causation we believe we have an unbroken, lasting perception of an object, even though no such thing is possible. “Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas; and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another, and draws after it a third, by which it is expell’d in its turn.”[9] Each idea and impression are separate isolated existences yet the imagination is bridging the gaps making the transition from one to another so smooth, that we mistake it for identity. Say I view a water bottle and then grab it to take a drink. My mind will tell me that the perception I have of the water bottle is singular and unbroken. Because I have seen it many time I do not think twice about the bend in the bottle as I grab it, nor the decline in water after I take it from my lips yet upon reflection it becomes clear that each of these actions would break my initial perception of the water bottle. My imagination will bridge the gaps between individual perceptions, because they usually follow one another, making it seem like one unchanged, unbroken perception. It is important to note that Hume is not saying that there are no “selves” or “persons”, what he is saying is, that we can never perceive sameness of self or person, over time.

As we have already seen, Hume argues that the whole concept of identity over time is an illusion, yet to make matters worse, we seem to also confuse numerical (perfect identity) and qualitative identity. Hume writes: „Thus a man, who hears a noise, that is frequently interrupted and renew’d says it is the same noise; tho’ ‘tis evident the sound have only a specific[10] identity and resemblance, and there is nothing numerically the same, but the cause, which produc’d them.“[11] We mistake multiple sounds for one sound because the sounds resemble each other. This is the same as we have seen above regarding our perception of self. We need only look at the example of the river Hume employs, to realize just how selective our perceptions really are. “Thus as the nature of a river
consists in the motion and change of parts; tho’ in less than four and twenty hours these be totally alter’d.\[12\] Claiming that a river remains the same over a course of time, would for Hume be mistaking numerical identity (perfect identity) with qualitative identity, since all the parts are gradually changed over time, and thus we cannot have an uninterrupted and unchanging perception of it.

This has led some to argue, that the river is more than just the water that flows in it, but what would that be then? Is the river then defined by the river bed, or the river water? Or perhaps the time the water stays in contact with the soil at the bottom of the river before flowing on? It seems counter intuitive but perhaps there is nothing that the river is except a bundle of all these things constantly shifting and changing.

It would seem, that we are somehow less averse to change when it is something that is normal for us. „What is natural and essential to any thing is, in a manner, expected; and what is expected makes less impression, and appears of less moment, than what is unusual and extraordinary.“\[13\] It seems evident that our idea of identity is a mere construct when we are able to apply it to objects which we admit change on a regular basis. A parallel can here be drawn to the identity of persons. It is common knowledge that most, if not all, of our body is replaced after a certain period of time. Also evident is the fact that we do not stay the same shape or size all through our life. Yet we have no problem assigning a continuous identity to ourselves, even though, logically speaking, it is impossible to have the kind of numerical, one to one, identity we claim hold throughout the life of a person.

Hume’s theory as described above seems easy to follow and very appealing, but Hume’s contribution to personal identity is generally not as popular as it deserves. In what follows I will argue that Hume’s unpopularity is partly due to the fact that the theory is at odds with how we normally view identity, and partly due to the ambiguity of the appendix to Treaties.

2. Objections to Hume’s theory
There are a number of reasons why Hume’s theory is not very popular, below I will briefly go over a few and explain why I think they fail to cause any serious damage to Hume’s theory.

Defending Hume is not an easy task. The main goal with his theory of personal identity, was to find out what we can actually know about identity, nothing more, and herein lays the problem. Hume introduced a theory of personal identity which at first glance seemed very far from the way we live our lives today, and it is easy to assume the consequence of bundle theory to be a complete lack of moral responsibility. If, however, we look closer at his theory, we will find that Hume’s theory can survive all these objections. In what follows, I will try to refute some of the most common objections to Hume’s theory, namely those set forth by Reid\[14\]. I will rely heavily upon Harry Lesser’s paper from 1978 which, not only offers a good refutation of Reid’s critique, but also projects a Humean approach onto some topics, (such as moral responsibility), which Hume did not write about, but which nevertheless are relevant to the discussion of personal identity.

2.1 First Objection
First is the objection that Hume’s theory fails because we cannot think without first having a self. In Essays III, 4. Reid argues that for something to think, there must be something that thinks, a base onto which we can apply thought, so to speak. This is a common intuition shared by many. It is hard for us to accept that there is nothing which does all the thinking. Reid explains: „My personal identity, therefore, implies the continued existence of that indivisible thing that I call myself. Whatever this self may be, it is something that thinks and wonders what to do and decides and acts and is acted on. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers. My thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment – they have no
continued, but a successive existence; but that self or I to which they belong is permanent, and has the same relation to all the succeeding thoughts, actions, and feelings, which I call mine.”[15] It seems, for Reid, unthinkable that there be no thinker to think. When he writes “I am not thought; I am not action” Reid is writing in direct contrast to Hume. Where Hume thinks that all we are, are perceptions, Reid argues that there must be something, which has these perceptions. It is however, unclear how Reid would justify this unchanging something. Whatever it may be that Reid thinks is the “I” or “self” that thinks, (be it a soul or some other persistent object), he does not produce a satisfying answer, as to how we can know that we have this unchanging “I” or “self”. Just like saying that there is something more to a river than a series of related perceptions, it seems illogical to say that there is something more to a self than a series of perceptions bundled together. There is nothing that has the perceptions, the self is constituted by a series of perceptions much like the river is constituted by, among other things, the water that flows in it.

2.2 Second Objection
Reid also addresses another common critique many share regarding Hume’s theory. It goes as follows; in everyday language we use personal pronouns such as “I” and “WE”, and for good reason. Speaking in the impersonal mode Hume’s theory suggests, would be impractical and too long. Harry Lesser looks closer at this problem this in his paper from 1978: „Is it not replacing sense by nonsense to say, instead of ,I thought it was dinner-time, decided to break off studying, and went to eat,’ At such-and-such a place and time there was a thought about dinner, a decision that study should cease at that place and time, and a movement towards food“[16] This does indeed seem a worse alternative to normal conversation, but this does not mean that we ought to conclude that Hume’s theory is mistaken. Lesser points out that to argue against a mode of speech based on its impracticality on an everyday level, would lead us to also discard many useful scientific ways of speaking: „The language of particle physics is no use for ordinary talk about physical objects, and the various technical languages of psychology are not much use in every-day human communications; but this does not affect the usefulness of either for scientific purposes. Similarly, if Hume is right, the impersonal way of speaking about mental and physical states might be extremely useful for the purpose of accurate and dispassionate self-analysis.”[17] There are many subject specific ways of speaking which would not be useful on an everyday basis, yet they serve a function nevertheless. Lesser believes Hume’s theory may be of use for self-analysis. Hume himself does not allude to this function of his theory, yet it is extremely plausible, and under all circumstances it serves to show that we may find a practical use of this impersonal way of expressing mental states, despite not using this mode of speech in every-day language. One might be inclined to argue here, that it is not just the use of words such as “I” and “WE” that makes up identity, and if there is no identity, then why do we operate with identity in society? This is an understandable argument. At first glance Hume’s theory seem very far from how we actually behave on a day to day basis, yet if one looks a little closer one will discover that this problem is linguistic, just as the one described by Lesser. We use identity on an everyday basis because it is easier than navigating the complex and difficult explanation of causal history we would have to provide in order to say even the simplest of things. Take the example of a meeting between two old friends. They see each other on the street, and one says to the other „Hello human who, at an earlier point in time and space, had a drink at the pub on elm street with the human who, at an earlier point in time and space, was a past self of the bundle of perceptions that I am now.” This is accurate and we need not draw in a consistent identity through time, for this conversation to make sense, however, it is so much easier for us to simply say „Hi john.”

It is possible to navigate in the world without the concept of personal identity but it is impractical. This may be why we have evolved to see one another as continuous beings. It is easier to act in a group if we presume (however wrong that may be) that others, and ourselves, stay the same throughout our lives.
2.3 Third Objection

The 3rd and last objection from Reid that I will cover in this paper is also the most potentially damaging to Hume, namely the question concerning moral responsibility. Reid argues that moral responsibility is highly dependent upon the sort of persistence through time which Hume’s theory rejects. Hence the only way one can be morally responsible for an action is if one is the same person as the person who committed the action. For the most part this seems fairly straightforward. We do hold people responsible for actions committed in the past, if we did not, all punishment would be unjust. Lesser argues that a Humean could interject that this link between past crime and present punishment does not have to be one of perfect identity. It could, instead, be a hereditary link. “[...] although a ‘person’ at any one time is not identical with ‘himself’ at any earlier time, he is the result of ‘his’ earlier life, because present events are the result of past events”[18] If I am being punished for a crime, I may not be the same person as the person who committed the crime, but because I am a result of that person, his responsibilities are now my responsibilities. Much the same as taking a loan, I may regret having taken a student loan in my youth, but me being a different person now, does not absolve me from the commitment I made to repay the money I borrowed. Speaking as strict Humeans however, we cannot say that there are any perceivable links between past and present selves, for as we have already see, causal links are not perceivable. This is a problem, but we can get around it by arguing that the hereditary link described by Lesser, can be seen as a useful fiction which lets us hold people responsible for past actions. There are no real connections between past and present selves or persons, but in order for society to function, we must be able to reward or punish actions; this hereditary link between past and present persons (although fictional), allows us to do that.

2.4 Fang’s objection

Another consequence of Hume’s theory which may be hard for some to accept, is that since perfect identity only holds between unchanging and uninterrupted perceptions, essentially nothing would have perfect identity. Wan-Chaun Fang presents us with the following example in his text from 1984[19]: Any new perception will alter the identity of an object, and a new perception can be brought about by almost any external or internal force acting upon the object in question. This in turn means that everything said to be identical over time is, in fact not, identical over time. This is counter intuitive for many people, and it leads Fang to argue that Hume’s theory is unpopular for this reason. Most people would not define identity in this way. For them it would be nonsense to argue that the identity of a traffic light will change because it goes from red to green.

It is important to note here, that Hume’s goal was to establish what we can actually know about identity. He concludes that identity is made up by the imagination. That many people would argue that a traffic light stays the same over time, could be said to strengthen Hume’s argument, because it shows how hard our mind works to breach the gaps between our individual perceptions. Hume is not exempt from the power of imagination, he too will have a feeling that a person is the same as he/she was yesterday, or that a rock is the same as the one seen yesterday, but we must remember that Hume seeks to look at identity through empirical glasses and asks, what can we actually know about identity? Can we, using reason, account for identity? Hume finds the answer to be no.

Fangs argument seems to rest on the fact that what Hume labels identity, many of us would not label as such. This is probably correct, but it is not a point against Hume as much as it is a reminder that our intuition about identity is not always based on reason.

3. The Appendix to Treaties

The appendix to Treaties has long been read as Hume expressing doubt about his own theory. Many have argued that Hume saw flaws in his initial theory of personal identity and wrote the appendix in order to address these doubts. I believe this to be one of the reasons why his theory has never gotten the momentum it deserves. After all, why should we listen to a theory when the person who
expressed set theory, does not himself trust it? Even to this day, the appendix to Treaties is probably discussed more than the actual text to which it was written. This I believe to be a mistake. Arguing about what Hume may or may not have meant, may be interesting, but the main text gives us all we need without all the ambiguous hints we find in the appendix. Looking a little harder at the appendix reveals that it is a text of great ambiguity.

It is hard to decode what exactly Hume sees as the problem with his theory. Many have written about what Hume wants to correct with the appendix and interestingly enough, many theorists use the same paragraphs to support very different readings. Take the paragraph in appendix in which Hume writes; “But all my hopes vanish, when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness.”[20] This is a very commonly used paragraph and for good reason. It is very ambiguous and enables us to use it as evidence to support multiple readings of the appendix. Stroud explains the danger thusly; „This statement of the difficulty is ambiguous. It could mean that Hume has no hope of explaining what actually unites our successive perceptions into one mind or consciousness—what actually ties them together to make up one mind. Or it could mean that he has no hope of explaining what features of our perceptions and what principles of the mind combine to produce in us the thought or belief that we are individual minds—what ties the successive perceptions together in our thought, or what makes us think of them as tied together. Obviously these two interpretations are different.“[21] It is possible, according to Stroud to use this paragraph to support two very different readings of the appendix. This, I argue, is the main problem concerning the appendix.

Below I will briefly sketch out three, rather different, readings of Hume’s appendix provided by Ellis, Pears and Swain, in order to show just how much it is possible to disagree over this particular text. Pears holds to the first reading of the paragraph mentioned by Stroud, namely that what Hume was worried about was that he couldn’t explain how perceptions belong to only a single mind. Swain on the other hand finds this paragraph to be a statement of desperation about how Hume used to view identity, and not a frustration about his current theory. Swain argues that Hume know his theory lacks a connection between perceptions, but that this is not because his theory is faulty. And lastly, we will take a look at Ellis, who argues that what Hume is upset about in the appendix, is how the prescription of the identity of objects are different, to the one we use when prescribing identity to ourselves.

3.1 Pears
According to Pears, Hume runs into a problem when he reflects on why our perceptions belong to a single mind. There is nothing which should hold them to one mind rather than to two. Pears forms his argument based on the first paragraph on the last page of the appendix. „[…] 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 connection among them, there would be no difficulty in the case. For my part, I must plead the privilege of a skeptic, and confess that this difficulty is too hard for my understanding.“[22] Pears argues that upon reflection, Hume realizes that since there can be nothing which links different perceptions together; there is nothing which holds them to be in one mind alone. To fix this problem, Hume would need to find a stronger connection between perceptions, and this is what bothers him. Pears elaborates, arguing that since perceptions hold no physical location, the causation mentioned by Hume would have to dispense with continuity in space: “If direct mental causation has to dispense with contiguity in space, it must rely on some substitute for contiguity in space: and the only plausible substitute is sameness of mind-i.e., if one mental event is going to cause another directly, they must be within the same mind. That is the most plausible substitute for contiguity in space as it figures in physical causation. But if this is the
situation, sameness of mind will require some independent basis, and the only plausible independent
basis is association with the same body.”[23] The only logical fix for this problem, Pears argues, is to
use the association of mind with a body. In this way, a perception can be said to belong to one mind,
if that mind belongs to one body. This inability to link perceptions to one mind is why Hume wrote
the appendix, according to Pears.

3.2 Swain
Swain reading of the appendix is very different from Pears. Swain argues that Hume admits to being
unable to answer the question of what links two perceptions together. Like Pears, Swain uses the
above mentioned paragraph from the appendix as her starting position, but unlike Pears, she argues,
that Hume’s admittance of ignorance is not a fail in his theory of personal identity. „If a satisfactory
account of personal identity must explain this principle, then, Hume admits, his account is defective,
but there is no reason for anyone, including Hume, to think that a satisfactory account of personal
identity, especially one which denies the perfect identity and simplicity of the self, must explain
this.”[24] With a reading like this, it follows that Hume writes the appendix in order to defend his
theory on the grounds that it stands true, despite the failure to explain any link between different
perceptions. In fact, Hume is, according to Swain, skeptical as to whether or not this question even
has an answer. This is why Hume wrote the appendix, according to Swain.

3.3 Ellis
In his paper The Contents of Hume’s Appendix and the Source of His Despair (2006), Ellis argues
that Hume’s reason for writing the appendix is due to an inconsistency in the ascription of identity in
persons compared to objects. When we view an object, we will have a perception of that object, and
the multiple perceptions we have of that object will give us a sense of its identity, yet as we have
seen, this is merely an illusion because of the smooth transition between all these perceptions. In
Treatise Hume argues that the same is true for the self, but here lies the problem. With an object we
need to perceive it in order to form a perception of it, onto which we get this false identity, yet with
the self, Hume clearly states that there can be no perception of the self[25] Ellis argues that this is
what Hume is worried about in the appendix. He has, upon reflection of his theory of personal
identity, found a question he cannot answer: „What series of perceptions could one have such that
feeling a connection among these perceptions would result in one’s inventing an idea of a self? If
there is an intimate connection between what the perceptions reflected upon are of and the content
of the invented idea, then it would seem that in order for us to invent an idea of a persisting self, we
must at some point have a perception of, or perceive, a self. But, according to Hume, we never do.
This, I claim, is at the heart of Hume’s worry in the Appendix.”[26] If we never actually perceive a
self, there would be no base onto which an idea of a self could be formed. We see a tomato, we form
an idea of a tomato, but we have an idea of the self without even having seen it. This is why Hume
wrote the appendix, according to Ellis.[27]

It is hard, if not impossible, to say who is right. All three reading of the appendix are well formulated
and use evidence found in the text. When it comes down to it, it will have to be a matter of feel. One
could argue however, that we do not need different readings of the appendix because we do not
need the appendix to begin with. All the faults and successes of Hume’s theory are resting in his
original work from Treaties and all the appendix does is pollute the original texts with half
formulated doubts. The arguments made by Ellis and Pears apply to Hume’s chapter on personal
identity from Treaties and we need not bring the appendix into the discussion at all. It is interesting
to know what Hume himself found missing from his theory, but it is not necessary for us to navigate
the appendix in order to learn something about Hume’s theory of personal identity. All the
information we need lie within the original text; the appendix does not provide any additional
information.

4. Conclusion
The implications of Hume’s theory of personal identity, is not as controversial as it has been speculated. It often seems that people are reluctant about accepting Hume’s theory because it is intuitively unpleasant. It is important to remember that Hume writes about what we can actually know about identity, not about how we use it. The function of identity, be it an illusion or not, has nothing to do with Hume’s text. In other words, the why of identity is not in focus just the what, and as we have seen above, we can function perfectly well even if we accept that identity is an illusion. If I were to guess, as to why we invent identity in the way we do, I would argue that it had something to do with the way we have evolved and how we use the illusion of identity to recognize friend from foe and engage in complicated situations in society. This is however not the point of this paper, so I will spend no more time on it.

It is clear that there are many objections to Hume’s theory of personal identity, yet upon closer scrutiny it also seems clear that many of these objections do not actually pose much of a threat to Hume’s theory.

Hume himself may also bear some of the blame for the lack of interest in his theories. The appendix to Treaties is, as I have shown, subject to multiple different readings and appear to muddle the waters more than anything else.

Whatever Hume’s reason for writing the appendix, the fact of the matter remains, that we will most likely never find out what he actually wanted to achieve with it. As we have seen above, it is an ambiguous text and there are almost as many theories as there are people reading it. What we ought to do is to abandon the appendix and focus our attention on Hume’s main work on personal identity found in Treaties. Let’s base our support or critique on Hume’s work in the main body of Treaties, and not on his complicated afterthoughts found in the appendix.

References

Notes
[2] We shall return to this topic again later in the text under the headline “Fang’s objection”
[4] Ibid., Sect 6, P. 299.
[5] Ibid., Sect 6, P. 300.
Specific identity is in this case the same as qualitative identity.

I have chosen Reid’s critique because it is one which is generally shared by many.


In his paper, Ellis takes time to point out the ambiguity of the appendix, and provides an extensive clarification and categorization of the different theories which has been based upon the appendix over the years. Despite this ambiguity, Ellis concludes his paper arguing that his reading is the most text accurate one, and therefore the most correct.

Mgr. Lasse Nielsen
Palacký University Olomouc
Philosophical faculty
Lasse.nielsen02@upol.cz