

Hume on Personal Identity

1. Argument against identity: David Hume, true to his extreme skepticism, rejects the notion of identity over time. There are no underlying objects. There are no “persons” that continue to exist over time. There are merely impressions. This idea can be formulated as the following argument:

1. All ideas are ultimately derived from impressions.
2. So, the idea of a persisting “self” is ultimately derived from impressions.
3. But, no impression is a persisting thing.
4. Therefore, there cannot be any persisting idea of “self.”

In short, because the “self” must be a constant, persisting, stable thing, and yet all knowledge is derived from impressions, which are transient, non-persisting, variable things, it follows that we do not really have knowledge of a “self” (and therefore, there IS no self; or, at least, we should be agnostic on the issue).

2. You are a bundle of impressions: Try to think about your “self.” You cannot. Or, when you do, the only things you are thinking about are individual impressions, such as hot, cold, light, dark, love, hate, pain, pleasure, etc.

It follows that all “you” are is a bundle of successive impressions, or perceptions. But, there is no underlying, stable thing called a “self.” How COULD there be? The bundle of impressions is just a collection of “variable and interrupted” parts. How can THAT constitute identity? How can THOSE things be what compose something stable, continuous, and persisting?

3. Why we make the mistake: Having rejected identity in objects or persons, Hume then attempts to explain WHY we THINK that things have identities.

First, Hume notes that we have a strong inclination to call something the “same” even when it is radically different. For instance, remove a chunk of matter from some object and we call it the same. A mature oak tree is said to be the “same” as the sapling. A fat adult is said to be the “same” as the tiny infant. So strong is this inclination that philosophers have attempted to explain identity via souls—unobservable, immaterial objects. As if THAT could ever explain anything!

Second, Hume has shown previously that it is the experience of a constant conjunction of impressions which leads us to infer causation. Here, Hume adds that it is constant inference of cause and effect (of “objects” on “our” senses, and “our” prior impressions on “our” future ones) which lead us to infer identity.

Thus, Hume notes that Locke was correct when he said that memory has something to do with identity—for, we would never be able to infer causation if we had no memories. However, Locke confused the MEANS of INFERRING identity with identity itself. The tool by which we discover identity cannot BE identity, however.

4. Conclusion: In sum, all that we perceive are distinct, separable, successive impressions. But, we never observe any necessary connections between distinct existences (as demonstrated in the causation section). However, when the mind receives a series of uninterrupted impressions that are SIMILAR, it assumes that the only thing that is changing is time, and not the impressions themselves. The mind then infers (mistakenly) that this underlying series of impressions is itself a persisting individual THING, such that “identity” is just a union created in the imagination.

[Question: Why is it that “I” seem to only perceive ONE particular series, or bundle, of perceptions? If I am nothing more than a bundle of perceptions, what is it that bundles them together? What is it that makes “your” perceptions inaccessible to “me” and vice versa?]