

David Hume's Concept of Personal Identity: Perfect and Imperfect Identity

Dr. NARGISH AFROZA

PhD in Philosophy, Department of Communication, Philosophy and Politics, University of Beira
Interior, Portugal

Abstract

The famous 18th centuries Scottish philosopher David Hume famously mentioned the “bundle theory” in the work “A Treatise of Human Nature” where he referred to identity as a bundle of different perceptions. We believe that personal identity is the sum of our experiences through which we perceive our own identity to be numerically the same through mental processes. But he clarifies that this is how we misinterpret “identity”, when in fact the analysis of “identity” is immutability and constancy over time. Hume defined “identity” based on this type of analysis, known as “perfect identity”. So, any “identity” of person or thing cannot be “perfect identity” because it changes over time, but Hume clarifies why we mistakenly think of ourselves as “the same” and “one” over time. He mentions various examples to explain personal identity such as vegetables, republic, river, church etc. Where he tries to make us clear that even though our mind perceives these as perfect over time, they are actually imperfect identities because they can never remain constant over time. But the question is, how do we interpret our identity by misconceptions and illusions? This question is truly arguable by Hume's concept. However, the main purpose of this paper is to analyze how Hume explains “perfect” and “imperfect identity” in by the evaluations of his analysis of personal identity.

Keywords: David Hume, Bundle Theory, Personal Identity, Perfect Identity, Imperfect Identity.

INTRODUCTION

In Hume's analysis of the theory of personal identity in his famous work “A Treatise of Human Nature” (THN), he clarifies the collective available experience of the individual. Because in his view, “identity” can never be personal identity, he uses the word “sameness” in this case. “Sameness” is a word that never corresponds to the word “changeable”, it expresses immutability over time. So, whenever Hume uses the word “identity”, he means “invariable” and “continuity”. But we emphasize “invariable” and “continuity” in the analysis of our “personal identity”. In this case, Hume makes clear, we cannot easily perceive with the naked eye the change of person to the kind of soul we actually perceive. Because such changes are so “smooth” that we assume the person is numerically the “same” over time. Although Hume analyzed the matter, what we declare to be the same person over time is actually a mental process in which we cannot conceive of that object or person as different under the influence of time. To put it plainly, the similarity between our perceptions of the successors and the new perceptions is so profound that we imagine that one event imitates another, so that we imagine the same thing. In this case, the examples given by Hume in his book - oak tree, human cell, etc. - in this case we accept their “smooth” change as a “perfect identity”, but we do not admit any “absurd change” in identity because then the identity of the object would be lost.

However, Hume does not call such “smooth” changes a “perfect identity” because they change over time. So, he clarifies the definition of “perfect identity” with another example where he mentions a “mass of matter” where we cannot accept the slightest decay or addition of matter as this would violate the identity of the “mass of matter”. In that case, he makes it clear that the identity of persons or things we claim to be “perfect identities” is actually a misinterpretation of us. In fact, personal identity is “imperfect identity” where Hume recognizes change in our description of identity. Where we can necessarily imagine a person as the same person over time by mental action-reactions and necessary relations. So, according to Hume, our personal identity is nothing more than a mere imagination or fiction. Now I will analyze Hume’s theory in depth in this paper to see how he actually explains perfect and imperfect identity according to his terminology.

Hume Famously Denied any Evidence for The Existence of a Unified Concept of Self

In the Treatise of Human Nature (THN) 1.4.6 “Of Personal Identity”, Hume begins his critiques with that kind of philosopher who believes in the omnipresence of soul-consciousness and who holds that a constant invariable soul-consciousness which bears our identity and in that case, our existence is perfect and simple. Hume refuses that we have the idea of self, distinct from our particular perceptions, but he claims that the self is nothing more than a heaps of perceptions, just as a material object is nothing but bundles of qualities.

Hume announces that:

I must confess I can reason no longer with him. All I can allow him is, that he may be in the right as well as I, and that we are essentially different in this particular. He may, perhaps, perceive something simple and continu’d, which he calls *himself*; tho’ I am certain there is no such principle in me. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.3/p.252)

He claims, we can never conceive of ourselves apart from perception, nor can we observe anything apart from perception. Because when we actively try to find ourselves, we only gain our experience, that is, understanding. These perceptions never exist with time we declare any perception to be permanent, we can identify with a permanent soul. Moreover, when we cannot experience our perceptions as if we are deep in sleep, we cannot experience anything that exists in the form of our self. Similarly, if we cease all sense of experience, i.e., we die, we cannot claim anything that would convince us of the existence of a soul. Moreover, Hume, as an empiricist philosopher, cannot describe anything more than providing an analysis of experience that would identify the soul. But why do we believe that we have an abiding soul that endures through time as other philosophers have expressed? In order to clearly explain our misconception, Hume states that we try to explain the idea of the self, based on experience. According to Hume,

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. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.2/pp.251-52)

According to this quotation, if an impression can give the idea of a self, then that impression would remain the same without any change, which is not possible. It is noteworthy that Hume is dissimilar with Descartes because he seems that human is never denote any constant impression that gives his/her existence of soul. The very recent scholar DEMİRLİ comments on their critiques,

Hume does not confront the Cartesian puzzle head on and never worries about the problem of causation between mental and physical. It could be that in the back of his mind there was Locke’s comment that mind-body causation was no more in need of explanation than body-body causation.

(DEMIRLI, 2019, pp.244-45)

For Hume, the only basis of knowledge is our experience which we find through impressions and ideas. But Descartes does not speak of the origin of knowledge based on experience, he only mentions introspection in gaining self-knowledge where he claims thinking as the clear and eternal truth which he claims as the Ultimate Truth. But Hume does not mention any ultimate truth by which we will come to true knowledge of the knowledge of our souls. In this case, he clarified that what we claim to be soul is nothing but perception because we cannot see or feel anything beyond perception. So, we have no idea about the soul that is seen is nothing but Conventional idea. Hume states about perception, tis evident our pains and pleasures, our passions and affections, which we never supposed to have any existence beyond our perception, operate with greater violence, and are equally involuntary, as the impressions of figure and extension, colour and sound, which we supposed to be permanent beings. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.16/p.194)

In this context, Hume explains that those distinct impressions do persist at the one time, actually, they persist separately without any support to each other, for instance, when I feel a lot of emotional pain, I cannot at the very same time feel joy. So, joy and sorrow (or any distinct impressions) must be felt at two different moments in the sequence of time. They are never felt at the same time, i.e., the impressions exist on their own, their existence is separate from each other. So, there isn't any internal connection between them. Notwithstanding they exist as an aggregate in the mind, an analysis of such a theory does not find the concept of a soul. Therefore, Hume famously denied any evidence for the persistence of the soul as a substantial entity. In this context, Hume says, "I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions." (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.4/p.252)

Hume's bundle theory is the claim that person's existence is just the chain of experience to each other along different perceptions. Once Hume asserts a bundle conception of the self, this very fact means that he is denying a certain conception of the self rather than any conception. Particularly, he is denying a notion of the soul-based, as we have seen, on a constant and invariable impression. That impression doesn't exist at all. As Barry Stroud remarks in this context,

We know there is a difference between actually perceiving something and just thinking about that thing in its absence, and that, Hume says, is the difference between having an impression of something and having an idea of it. And the distinction between impressions and ideas is simply a distinction between the degrees of force and liveliness with which perceptions strike upon the mind. (Stroud, 1977, P.19)

For Hume, "Our thought is still more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change; nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment" (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.4/pp.252-53)¹. According to this view, there is no single force of the soul by which it can be proved that an object can remain the same even for a single moment, i.e., an object is changeable at every moment, i.e., an object is permanent at one moment but perishes at the next moment. Thus, every object/self is a successive perception at the variation of the time. However, according to Hume's bundle theory, since everything belongs to a bundle, the representational perceptions I am having are a bundle of different experiences that are constantly changing and temporary. As for example a river can be specified. Features of a river such as flow, tributary patterns, water courses, river

¹ it's very interested to know how David Hume explained his "Concept of Self", where he tried to define the following question, that is, what makes someone think it is the identical individual overtime? And am I the identical individual, when I was born and now, I write this paper, the same individual all the time? In his Treatise, Hume described, why he did not accept the continued process of a same identity.

with a name etc. But beyond these features of the river, we cannot observe anything that can in any way be called a river. So, we have to say that when we are witnessing the river, the characteristics of the river are appearing in our mind, and we are calling the river by name or identity based on those characteristics. This contradicts the theory of matter, which believes that every object has an empty, an element that is separate from the properties of matter and can exist independently.

Hume's doctrine of personal identity begins by rejecting Descartes' theory of the "soul". Because Hume does not consider experience to belong to an incorporeal soul. Moreover, they employ a single mind as the existence of the soul based only on experience rather than attributing it to an individually existent soul. According to his bundle doctrine (Hume, 1739), there is no sufficient or necessary relationship between various empirical works. But our empirical work suggests that such tasks may be illusory. In this case, we can experience a sequence of different and discrete realizations as separate but do not perceive any idea of a continuous entity. Hume refutes Descartes materialist concept of soul through the process of introspection. He argues in refutation of the idea that the soul is a concept of ours which we mistakenly support through perception, but since it is an underlying state of our emotions, we cannot perceive any such knowledge that would represent the concept of the soul. Hence, Hume strongly rejected Descartes's metaphysical soul. But Hume is disappointed in his conception of personal identity in the "Appendix" of his THN, stating that "I must confess I neither know how to correct my former opinions, nor how to render them consistent" (Hume, 1739, App. 10/p.633). At the end (in the conclusion), I will discuss Hume's declaration which is significant. Despite Hume's "Appendix" analysis of its flaws, he considers the concept of personal identity to be an important concept in psychology.

In the next, Hume illustrates a problematic question which remains "invariable" and "uninterrupted" (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.5/p.253) existence of identity.

An Invariable and Uninterrupted Existence Thro' The Whole Course Of Our Lives?

Hume states a rather decisive question in his THN: "What then gives us so great a propensity to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose ourselves possets of an invariable and uninterrupted existence thro' the whole course of our lives?" (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.5/p.253)

That is the brand-new question Hume phrases after concluding that there is no access to any invariable constant self. But then, why, against what reasoning demonstrates, why do we tend to confide that there is an invariable existence of person's identity, that is, a lasting identity all the time, when, actually, we just have a bundle of distinct perception? In order to explanation this question about the propensity to believe in a personal identity, Hume starts to present a general and abstract definition of identity applicable to any objects "We have a distinct idea of an object, that remains invariable and uninterrupted thro' a suppos'd variation of time; and this idea we call that of *identity* or *sameness*." (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.253)

According to Hume, identity is that which we have a distinct idea of which is actually an immutable and constant state through the inferred over of time. In that case, Hume claims that we do not understand the limited amount of contrast that occurs in an object in the supposed variation of time but identify it by relating an object to another object in the flow of time. Let's take this as the identity of the object. But Hume tries to make it clear to us that this analogy of object with time is actually the cause of confusion and error. Then, he determined that, "The relation 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.

” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.254)²

In fact, the relationship is so smooth that it simply transfers from one object to another that we think of it as continuous and unchanging but forget to appreciate its contrast. But we cannot perceive the movement of an object with time.

However, Hume’s theory of personal identity here is known as the bundle theory which he tried to express clearly in his THN. Although there have been various criticisms and discussions about his theory over time, which is now known as a controversial theory, famous scholar Terence Penelhum’s argument is particularly noteworthy in this context in “Hume on Personal Identity”. However, a question arises in the conception of Hume’s concept, what sort of experience do we actually have with the sense that we claim the existence of the soul? Here Hume makes it clear to us that we desperately want to believe that we have a unified and immutable self, but he explains that we have no such self that we can claim to be immutable and that what we believe is actually our mental process by which we perceive the soul. Therefore, that the soul is nothing but imaginary.

Now the question is if the self is a heap of distinct impressions (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.4/p.252), then why do people try to give different interpretations of what constitutes an ultimate self and why do people advocate it as a pure identity? And why do we attribute this (the self is a heap of distinct impressions) to establishing the idea of unity? Hume (Hume, 1739) seems that the origin of this mistakes lies in the similarity between “*the succession of different perceptions*” (my italics). To make this mistake is to attribute the existence or identity of an object to the existence or identity of an object based on the similarity between the distinct perceptions we find, but to treat each perception of the object as the same without distinguishing past perceptions of that object from current perceptions. In this case we do not want to accept the distinct existence of the object, which according to Hume, it is a false conception of our mind.

But it begs the question, how can I be directly aware of the above mental state? Because there is no mental observer by whom I understand my mental events. But if I gain knowledge about myself then I can understand the errors in relation to perceptions, but it is not easy to realize the different perceptions. It is in giving this interpretation that we come into conflict with the notions of uniformity and diversity, since we imagine an object capable of remaining unchanging with various objects existing continuously through time. He wrote, “Thus, we feign the continu’d existence of the perceptions of our senses, to remove the interruption; and run into the notion of a soul, and self and substance, to disguise the variation.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.254)

The important question that arises from now on is why do we think about the continuous existence of an object? To clarify the queries, David Hume (Hume, 1739) argues, the only error we see in this case is the only relation of resemblance we imagine, which is associated with the activity of the mental object, by which we make an entity a continuous entity. Let us consider. Because consciousness is in reality “a kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.4/p.253)

When we observe the same object successively, we cannot easily notice any change in that object but according to Hume’s identity of “mass of matter” if any part of that object is added or subtracted then the external object will never retain its identity, but we do not observe slow changes in that object. Because

² In this context, I would like to mention John Locke’s personal identity, a person can have a same consciousness, the current consciousness is connected to the past due to acts of consciousness, that is, the same. Because as long as he remembers, he will be able to maintain his identity. But unlike Hume, he (Locke) denies the relative identity.

change is so rare that we can hardly comprehend it and supposed that “*tis is nothing but a survey of the same object* (that is the numerical identity)” (Hume, 1739, T1 4.6.8/p.256) (added italics). In that case, to be considered as: “Tis remarkable, that where the change is produc’d gradually and insensibly we are less apt to ascribe to it the same effect.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.10/p.256)

The existence or identity of an object will be maintained only when the object changes gradually, i.e., when an object changes over time, but if we suddenly change the object, we will get another new object which will never be with the first object. But if we continue this change, then the identity of the object is maintained, which will never destroy the identity. As James Giles (Giles, 1993) in his “The No-self theory”, asks “why we have such a proclivity to ascribe identity to our successive perceptions” (Giles, 1993, P.177). Hume has answered that inquire, firstly “personal identity as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern, we take in ourselves” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.5/p.253). Secondly, Hume “starts his answer by distinguishing between the idea of identity and diversity” (Giles, 1993, P.177). It is said by Hume’s above statement that we cannot perceive the variety of an object and form its identity only on the basis of imagination and thought. Hume claimed that:

For as such a succession answers evidently to our notion of diversity, it can only be by mistake we ascribe to it an identity; and as the relation of parts, which leads us into this mistake, ... it can only be from the resemblance, which this act of the mind bears to that, by which we contemplate one continu’d object, that the error arises. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.7/p.255)

According to Hume, “diversity is the idea of several different in objects existing in succession and connected together by a close relation” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.253). As James Giles (Giles, 1993) claims that we think of these two concepts as separate because we seem of an entity as uniform at single time and uniform at another time, that is, we think of an object as uniform in the flow of time. In fact, we consider the object to have a “close relationship” with the succession of different perceptions. So, to justify this absurd idea, we imagine some false ideas that combine those ideas and we come up with the concept of originality by thinking these ideas exist. Which is just our imagination.

It is reasonable to say, then, that Hume thinks we always emphasize fiction when it explains to the identity of self. Because we misidentify the object as “one” to inherit the identity of the object. Actually, we cannot distinguish between “identity” and “diversity”. Hume, therefore, thinks that we derive the efficacy of such objects only by relying on fiction. Hume said in this context, “the passage of the thought from the object before the change to the object after it, is so smooth and easy, that we scarce perceive the transition, and are apt to imagine,” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.8/p.256). It is especially noted that the change in the object or person is so narrow from other changes that we cannot perceive the gap between them, and it occurs sensibly.

If we think that the concept of soul arises from the unity of our memory, then we are again in error. Because the mind aggregates our perceptions so that we perceive ourselves as permanent based on perceptions. A single sense of feeling in us unites our consciousness, i.e., the series of our feelings in a unified mind is affected by the habit of association of mind. This is why Hume (Hume, 1739) corrects our mistake by saying that our “(*selves*) are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.4/p.252) of our single mental entity. So, Hume claims that we think of ourselves as “unchanged” is wrong. It must be said our identities are as varied as our perceptions. He stated, “...that the objects, which are variable or interrupted, and yet are suppos’d to continue the same, are such only as consist of a succession of parts, connected together by resemblance, contiguity, or causation.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.7/p.255)

In this context, Hume (Hume, 1739) asked if mankind is a bundle of perceptions, what is the thing that unites/binding them? In order to answer to this question— “Belief, desire, and intention are central notions in mentality and agency. We provide conceptual and formal foundations for an ontology of those mental entities.” (Toyoshima et al., 2021, p.140). In such cases we can assume the existence of a single soul, so Hume points out the obvious limitations of his theory. Hume’s theory shows clear evidence of internal inconsistencies. Hume acknowledged the limitations of this doctrine in Appendix. However, although he seems to be correct about his theory, he expresses his inconsistency in the conclusion. The empirical soul we speak of is absurd according to Hume because there can be no concept of an abstract soul. In this context, he makes it clear that immutability and continuity are the interpretations of perfect identity which I explain later. now I am going to argue about numerical and qualitative/specific identity.

Hume’s Conception of Numerical Identity and Specific Identity

Now I am turning to the concept of “numerical identity” where Hume’s position is so controversial. Recent scholar Donald L.M Baxter (Baxter, 2017) states about Hume’s “difference” and “distinguish” meaning, When Hume says ‘different’ he means numerically distinct. For instance, in discussing time, he argues that the impression of time that one has in hearing five musical notes is not “different” from the impressions of the notes themselves, which is to say it is “not a sixth impression” (T 1.2.3.10/36). Were it different, it would be a sixth impression, i.e., numerically distinct..... “distinguishable,” he means that we can think of them as numerically distinct..... Any apparent distinguishing of “them” is really a distinguishing of things related to “them” (T 1.1.7.18/ 25). (Baxter, 2017, p.465)

And the word “identity” means Baxter states,

“identity’ Hume meant the same thing as we do-- numerical identity. Officially, however, by ‘identity’ Hume means numerical identity through time For identity at a time he apparently uses ‘simple’ or ‘inseparable’ as well as ‘same’. (Baxter, 2017, p.470)

Here I will show how Hume explains our notion of identity where we think that our identity is the same and there can be no dilemma. Below I will analyse what exactly we mean by numerical and qualitative identity before analysing Hume’s concept on that.

Qualitative identity: If two things are qualitatively similar; that means these two things are exactly similar to their qualities, but they are not numerically one. For instance, two basket balls are qualitatively identical but not numerically one.

Numerical Identity: If “two” things are fixed in the space and time, that means they are numerically identical, For instance, David is numerically identical to Hume. That is, if I point to one and then the other, in total, I have only pointed to one thing.

Hume first discusses personal identity in this quotation –

who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our Self; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.1/p.251)

When Hume express the identity of our living life, he has completely different idea to prescribes as a personal identity from any other philosopher. Hume wants to ensure that we are every moment intimately thinking that it is our perfect identity and simplicity, but that is just an error thinking. We do not have any impression that gives our perfectness and simpleness at the variation of the time to develop an idea that will give us a clear idea of the soul. We can only form an idea of ourselves based on perception which is obvious that the “*continue invariably the same, thro’ the whole course of our lives*” (Hume, 1739,

T1.4.6.2/p.251) (added italics). However, personal identity is not an impression that is constant and immutable that can give rise to such a conception of oneself. That's why, Hume concluded, "[T]he identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man is only a fictitious one" (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.14/p.252)³

When we perceive an object, we do not perceive its succession or related objects, but consider it to be the same object because, as Hume makes clear, we cannot contemplate the changeability of continuous objects. Hume states, "Perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; tho' I am certain there is no such principle in me." (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.3/p.252)

Hume argues that the way we interpret identity can never really be the correct explanation. We mistake our identity for what changes us over time. So, he tries to clarify that we try to identify the identity of any object through an illusion and make the mistake of distinguishing properly between numerical and qualitative identity. He tries to clarify us in this example,

Thus a man, who hears a noise, that is frequently interrupted and renewed says it is the same noise; tho' 'tis evident the sound have only a specific identity and resemblance, and there is nothing numerically the same, but the cause, which produc'd them. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.13/p.258)

We consider multiple sounds to be the same based on one "sound" which is a misconception because when we hear those sounds we find similarities with the above and we recognize them as the same or similar words. In this case Hume's example of the river carries an important message and shows how we make a mistake in distinguishing between numerical and qualitative identities. The example is "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 altered; this hinders not the river from continuing the same during several ages." (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.14/p.258).

When we claim that the motion of the river is the same even when we perceive it and identify it with a specific name, this is where we go wrong. But according to Hume we misunderstand the constancy and immutability which define identity, and make the mistake of analyzing numerical identity and qualitative identity specifically. Hume interprets that "The first is, that tho' we commonly be able to distinguish pretty exactly betwixt numerical and specific identity, yet it sometimes happens, that we confound them, and in our thinking and reasoning employ the one for the other." (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.13/pp.257-58)

However, when we see the river, we do not feel anything beyond its flowing water that identifies it as if. Looking at any river, we may think it is nothing but water because we only see the river flowing but cannot notice its change. But the question is, if the river water is always mixed with the ground, how can we accept its change? If we accept its change and new water flows again, then can the river be numerically the same? And another question—if we call that river by the same proper name, should it have a different name?

In answer to this question, Hume said, we call anything or a person by a proper name even if it changes. It seems counter-intuitive, but perhaps the "river" is nothing but an aggregate of all these perceptions, these are constantly flowing and variation such as a Buddhist Monk Nāgasena's "chariot" example in the

³ Here I have analysed that according to Hume, there is only a fiction of imagination among all identical perceptions of self-identity. When I precisely investigate about myself what is it, then there is nothing known but my collected memories. But I believe that by my accumulated memory functionally connected to each other (past and present), I am one. Although my physical form and mental constitution has changed, but I am one. Because when I think about myself, I connect with the present preserved memory, the perceptions of the present, and they are all expressed through imagination. Thus, I (we) believe the continuing self is existing. For Hume's concept our self is illusory represented (I was able to celebrate this information by reading about Hume's personal identity) at the variation of the time, because personal identity is only one time exists, another time would be false.

“Question of King Milinda” (N.K.G Mendis, 1993, p.30). Although the parts of the river are completely different, according to the view Hume floats here, is the “same” river in the sense that it is somehow related to the river of earlier days. We may note that in this passage, Hume was not saying that we assume or consider the river to be the same, but that it is the one. His remarks on the nature of the river being imperfectly identical with itself at various times; it is not a statement that describes our tendency to be considered to have identity.

It seems that change is something that we cannot easily observe, calling it a natural quality, “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” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.14/p.258). In fact, the concept of identity for us is something in which we recognize regular changes and we do not consider anything unreasonable in the fact that an object loses its identity because they occur in natural laws that deserve support. Thus, we explain the identity of all natural objects or beings which are constantly changing in the flow of time. And if such an explanation or argument is analysed as an explanation of irrational identity, then we will repeatedly face obstacles in terms of numerical or qualitative identity on the way in life and will not be able to explain anything easily. In that context, Hume says, “Here neither the form nor materials are the same, nor is there anything common to the two objects, but their relation to the inhabitants of the parish; and yet this alone is sufficient to make us denominate them the same.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.13/p.258)

Hume states here to make the numerical identity clear, to denote the identity of an object we do not refer to any particular part of it, just as to denote the identity of a train we do not denote a particular compartment but to the object that looks like that. As I indicate a branch of a river and the original river and explained that the branch of a river is the same river of original but when we are specifying only the branch of a river that does not mean that it is the real river. Because to say so in this case would give rise to a misconception of numerical identity. So, I have to think that a river can have many branches, but I can’t call those branches numerically different because in this case there would be confusion about the numerical identity of an object. Hume concludes that an object or person is organized by a number of perceptions which result in no mistake will be made. However, now I am proceeded to argue about “perfect identity”.

Hume’s Argument Concerning “Perfect Identity and Simplicity” And “Imperfect Identity”

In the above context, I examine on Hume’s concept of the “numerical identity” as the concept of “perfect identity”. According to him, the “perfect identity” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.8/p.255) will never change over time, if the slightest thing is attached or decayed then the “identity” is no longer maintained. That is why, he rejects the person’s identity. We will need to look at the ways in which he uses the term “identity”. He claims that “Our chief business, then, must be to prove, that all objects, to which we ascribe identity, without observing their invariableness and uninterruptedness, are such as consist of a succession of related objects.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.7/p.255)

Hume’s term of “identity” in a *strict sense* refers to the “invariableness and uninterruptedness”, “Thus, the principle of individuation [i.e., identity] is nothing but the invariableness and uninterruptedness of any object, thro’ a suppos’d variation of time,..” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.39/p.207)

For his strict definition of sameness is that our perceptions of “the notion of their distinct and continu’d existence must arise from a concurrence of some of their qualities with the qualities of the imagination” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.15/p.194). Although, we do not find any invariable impression to be “distinct and continuous existences” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.15/p.194), according to the *strict notion* of identity, Hume

seems that perceptions are “all impressions of internal and perishing existences” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.15/p.194). This concept clarifies that our perceptions can never have an unchanging and unbroken existence leading to “perfect identity”. For if we observe the existence of persons or things “perfectly”, we shall see that “break or interrupt the continuity of its actions not according to their real greatness, but according to their proportion to each other: And therefore, since this interruption makes an object cease to appear the same” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.9/p.256). As Hume explained, the process of change in the individual occurs by our “*uninterrupted progress of the thought*” (added italics) (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.9/p.256), which he regarded as imperfect identity. In this context, Hume clarified why “*we attribute our continued existence*” (added italics) (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.9/p.256), he states,

“After a little examination, we shall find, that all those objects, to which we attribute a continu’d existence, have a peculiar *constancy*, which distinguishes them from the impressions, whose existence depends upon our perception.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.18/pp.194-95)

But the “constancy” we experience is not so “perfect” that we can consider it “perfect identity”. Hence, the existence of “bodies” which are only slightly variable in the existence of determinate objects, is observable because “these changes are preserve a coherence and have a regular dependence on each other; which is the foundation of a kind of reasoning from causation and produces the opinion of their continu’d existence.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.19/p.195). So, in our everyday experience, if we observe a person after a long absence from his/her home, there is a dramatic change in that person, but we are used to such changes. That being said, even though change may appear to us to be “constancy”, it is not considered “perfect identity”. Hume commented about “perfect simplicity and identity”,

There is a very remarkable circumstance, that attends this experiment; which is, that tho' the change of any considerable part in a mass of matter destroys the identity of the whole, yet we must measure the greatness of the part, not absolutely, but by its *proportion* to the whole. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.9/p.256)

So, according to Hume, if an object undergoes even a small change in order to identify its existence, then the object has lost its identity according to “*strictly speaking*” (my italics). But in an ordinary way, we don’t really consider those small changes to be detrimental to the identity of an object. In this case, he gives an example of how our general idea can be identified through various changes – the replacement of parts in a ship, the growth of an oak tree, the change in weight of a human being etc.

According to the *strictly notion*, Heraclitus (6th-5th cent BC) also said that “*it is an impossible to step into the same river twice*” (Chitwood, 2004, p.67). So *strictly notion* can never exist in the variation of time, it is an unused theory. And ordinary theory governs our world. Because if this is the case, I will be able to see or hear an object only once, it is not possible to see or hear it for the second time according to *strictly notions*. In this context, Ainslie (Ainslie, 2001) stated,

The only question to ask is why we nonetheless believe that the mind has simplicity and identity. But since, as we have seen, most people do not ever consider their minds-or only rarely and indeterminately-Hume must mean for this question to apply not to the beliefs of the vulgar, but to the beliefs of those philosophers who reflectively investigate their minds in the course of their studies. (Ainslie, 2001, p.563) But the question is (to Hume) how can an object be numerically one when it exists differently at different times throughout its career? That is, O1 (O=object) at T1 (T=Time) is numerically one based on which condition O2 at T2? (see (Perry, 2009, pp 420-21))

According to Hume’s argument, an object O1 is identical to T1 at one time and the same object O2 is identical to T2 at a second time, but in this case the same objects are numerically the same even if they are present in different currents. But if we judge deeply according to Hume’s concept, we cannot call that

object perfectly the same. Thus object/person cannot express its identity *perfectly*, so it never *simply* exists. Hence, according to Swartz (Swartz, 2001),

$(O1 \text{ -at-} T1 \text{ } Q \text{ } O2 \text{ -at-} T1) \rightarrow (O1 \text{ -at-} T1 = O1 \text{ -at-} T1)$

This principle states that O1 is numerically identical to O2 at some particular moment of time if, at that moment of time, O1 and O2 share all their properties in common. The philosophical task confronting the negative, or bundle, theorists then becomes one of examining under what conditions this principle might turn out to be true. Questions of numerical identity are interchangeable with questions of numerical difference. For, if we can state under what conditions O1 and O2 are numerically identical, then we have also stated, implicitly, under what conditions O1 and O2 are numerically distinct. Simply: O1 and O2 will be numerically distinct when the conditions for their being numerically identical do not obtain... From a psychological point of view, it may be somewhat easier to focus on numerical difference than on numerical identity. But both approaches are equally valid. (Swartz, 2001, pp279-80)

However, in this case, Hume explained, he did not accept absurd change, he always accepted gradual change or slight replacement of an object. The gradual change or replacement is the fairly similar part of an object – which will be a gradual and minor change of its properties. In that case, Hume says,

A change in any considerable part of a body destroys its identity; but ‘tis remarkable, that where the change is produc’d *gradually* and *insensibly* we are less apt to ascribe to it the same effect.... From which continu’d perception, it ascribes a continu’d existence and identity to the object. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.10/p.256)

Hume believed that we depend on the mind to analyse our identity because all of our senses are perceived by the mind, he states, “The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man,” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.15/p.259). In analysing the concept of identity, the distinct existence of sensation or sense refers to its impression which would be caused by “fallacy or illusion”(Hume, 1739, T1.4.2.5/p.189). Hume identified our “mistake” in explaining the distinct and continuous existence of the “senses” or “bodies” as arising from our continuous mental imagination. The mind integrates perception with our illusions and claims a separate existence, separate from the senses. Thus, based on the imagination, we have the idea of the various perceptions which constitute the individual’s identity, Hume says, “We have also a distinct idea of several different objects existing in succession, and connected together by a close relation” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.253). We hold that the relation of perceptions is a continuous state which “The relation 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.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.254). In this case, we claim that the “smooth” and “continuity” of the object on which the idea of resemblance and causal relation of different perceptions resides, which is actually the imaginary union of perceptions. As Pears states in this context, Hume wrote the text of the Treatise, he believed that his theory of personal identity, founded on resemblance and causation, was an adequate theory, in spite of the fact that it does not satisfy philosophers’ dreams about perfect identity. He believed as we say nowadays, that his analysis of the concept of personal identity was correct. (Pears, 1975, p.17)

Hume thinks, we believe that all existence of object are “invariable” and “uninterrupted”, that’s why we claim that we have an identity and uniformity. So, to justify the identity of matter we imagine some “new and unintelligible principle” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.254) that connects different things. Based on this concept, we want to get the identity of a continuous object that “mistakes” the similarity of different objects. Because the relationship between our succession of perceivers is so “smooth” that we assure ourselves that “the next to ascribe to it a perfect identity” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.254). So, to speak, we

assign identities to objects based on “false” (imagined) relations of perception – what Hume says is our “mistake”. And where this we cannot imagine in this way, our fiction “something unknown and mysterious” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.6/p.254) which will give us the “invariable” and “uninterrupted” identity of object/person.

To be honest we never access any “real connexion” of perceptions to be create our identity (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.16/p.259). Hence, it is to say that no principle can be found to prove the continuity of our identity which actually lays down the relations of attachment of perceptions. Notwithstanding, for Hume, the identity of an individual is a single bundle of our minds which is an imaginary concept.

According to Hume, the individual’s mental process in which various expressions are connected to each other by the mutual causal connections that “they mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.19/p.261). He compares this bundle of minds to “a republic or commonwealth” and clarifies that it never claims to be a “perfect” unity, but that this bundle indicates an “imperfect” unity. He said in this context, a republic or commonwealth, in which the several members are united by the reciprocal ties of government and subordination, and give rise to other persons, who propagate the same republic in the incessant changes of its parts. And as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition,... Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation. (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.19/p.261)

Here, Hume explains, a “republic” is composed of a bundle where the members change their government, laws, and constitutions as needed, but are known as “the same independent republic”. Similarly, even though different parts of the same person change, he is known as the same person because of his causal connection. Even if one forgets his previous act, he is still held responsible for that act by causal connection. In this case, Hume claims that Locke’s (Locke, 1690) example of “the prince and the cobbler” is “absurd” where the memory of the prince passes to the cobbler, and he thinks of himself as the prince and vice versa (see (Locke, 1690, E2.27.15/p.324)). Hume believed that in addition to memory, we can maintain our personal identity through conscious thought, future thinking, and present decisions in causal relationships. In this context, Hume says, “When we add a *sympathy* of parts to their *common end*, and suppose that they bear to each other, the reciprocal relation of cause and effect in all their actions and operations.” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.12/p.257)

Hume thinks, in maintaining identity, we carry perceptions with each other and add “sympathy” to them. These causal processes occur in the same way that “animals and vegetables” retain their individual identities which undergo various changes yet allow us to declare them to be the same. But Hume emphasizes the concept of identity in a weak sense, even if identity is strictly defined as “continuity” and “immutability”. He tried to analyse the “imperfect identity” through logical and irrational analysis of “perfect identity”. In the above example also, we have tried to find the “perfect identity” like “vegetables and animals” even though they undergo a complete change within a few years we claim its *continuity*.

I think that in this consideration there is no exact criterion which would determine whether the concept of identity is right or wrong. In this case, Hume argued, the individual’s slight change has called his/her “imperfect identity”. For no perception of a person ever remains in the same state as it grows from small to large, sometimes fat, and sometimes thin (see (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.12/p.257)). Hume, therefore, thinks that “imperfect identity” is justifiable in terms of personal identity because no perception is always the same. For if we deny the bundle of different perceptions then personal identity is untenable. Hume therefore thinks that the aggregates of perceptions is a process of minds connected with causal relations.

So, it can be said that the causal relationship between perceptions follows “imperfect identity”. This concept of “personal identity” corresponds to the definition of “imperfect identity”. It is not an identity that is unbroken and immutable or perfect, but one that involves change in its own constitution. Despite these changes, the self can still be recognized as, in an “imperfect” sense, the “same” self because it is somehow related to the former self. However, it is time for the conclusion that what I conclude from Hume’s about that theory.

Conclusion

We can conclude that according to Hume, we have no self-concept other than a bundle of perceptions. Perceptions exist differently in our minds and are “closely related” by relations. For this reason, Hume makes clear that memory not only discovers individual identity, but that every perception is related to each other by analogy and causality. So it is clear to us that Hume intended to base his theory of personal identity only on necessary relations. That is why he cites many examples in his Treatise to clarify the concept of personal identity and at the same time clarify the concept of perfect identity. Because we confuse “perfect” and “imperfect” identity in analyzing our personal identity. Where we regard our eternal existence as “invariable” and “uninterrupted”. Hume, however, supports this belief and says that in the identity of all “vegetables” and “animals” we wish to mark the “perfect identity” because we believe it to be constantly existing, though it changes in the course of time. But Hume makes it clear, the slightest change in substance is “perfect identity” will create barriers to identification.

Hence, personal identity belongs to “imperfect identity”. But the arguments I see in this case are – 1. I consider personal identity to exist continuously, but we change over time. The question here is “permanence” and “changeability” – contradictory words. Hume states in terms of this argument that we “mistakenly” consider ourselves to be “continuous”. 2. We can observe ourselves changing but still why do we declare ourselves to be one and continuous? In this context, Hume argues that we never accept “radical” change, so we accept “gradual” changes in personal identity, i.e., small changes in different parts of the person over time, which do not cause any loss of personal identity. 3. Why do we get the identity of the same person even though different perceptions of the person change? According to Hume, we never exist by a single perception, we exist by a combination of different perceptions, and the mind integrates these perceptions by various imaginary relations. But we do not perceive any “real connexion” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.16/p.259) between different perceptions. In this case, Hume says, using identity “in an improper sense” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.7/p.255) we claim individuals as the same person. For in identity, we consider the relation between the object and the various perceptions alike, and to consider the object as distinct requires the assumption of its regular existence as fixed and uninterrupted. But as Hume makes clear, we are never able to understand the relation between objects and their various perceptions without the concept of the whole object.

To overcome this difficulty Hume considers that a person bears the same identity, saying that “The same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity” (Hume, 1739, T1.4.6.19/p.261). He further explains that personal identity is made up of various changes and those changes are integrated in our minds and are closely related in terms of cause and analogy. But everything happens through our imagination, because the changes in the object relate to its succession and give that object its identity as the same object. Hume’s concept of personal identity, then, can be said to be based on only “relation”.

Hume’s reference to our imaginary relations in terms of “personal identity” allows us to believe that we

think of a former person as the same person as he is now, even after the person's all parts have changed. In this case, he clarified, the concept of personal identity can never be derived from impressions because impressions are never the same. Although, the "relationship" we base the identity of the soul on is actually a "mistake". Thus, Hume does not call the soul a mere impression, nor can it be analyzed by means of any concept, so the soul is non-existent. Although, Hume expressed the dissatisfaction in the Appendix to his Treatise on personal identity that resemblance and causality are insufficient to constitute the personal identity. According to his argument, since all ideas arise from our impressions, no associative principle can conceive of an idea of itself. Now the question is how do perceptions form a bundle? Hume explained his inability to do this in his Appendix where he could not clarify how metaphysical principles relate to unifying perceptions. He then pointed out the error in his own account: "I am sensible, that my account [of the connections of perceptions] is very defective, and that nothing but the seeming evidence of the precedent reasoning cou'd have induc'd me to receive it." (Hume, 1739, T App. 20/p.635)

But Hume expressed frustration at not being able to resolve this error and said he could not find any satisfactory principle that would unify those various perceptions into a clear relation. This is why Hume's skepticism developed, where he expressed skepticism about external objects and people because he always expressed an irrational doctrine about our personal beliefs.

Hume's scholar Sunny Yang's (Yang, 2018, p.192) explanation in this case is significant because if the person is a bundle, then his/her all parts will be related together. By this, we can clarify the idea of a soul that there will be a satisfactory principle by which to explain the connection of the parts. But in this case, Hume argues that it is not plausible to analyse logically, how the relation of perception occurs in order to analyse the concept of soul. Sunny Yang tentatively suggested Hume's delusion, she probably understood that there was no connection or bond between mental properties that could actually be explained. However, we do not find a satisfactory answer as to why Hume expressed doubts about personal identity in the Appendix because he does not explicitly mention the explanation that prevents him from analysing the clear concept.

Acknowledgement

This article is an important part of my PhD thesis. Therefore, I am very grateful to my PhD advisors, Prof. Dr. André Barata is the full professor in Philosophy from the University of Beira Interior (Portugal) and Prof. Dr. José Rosa is the full professor in Philosophy from the University of Beira Interior (Portugal) and Assistant Prof. Dr. Alexandra from the University of Minho (Portugal) for their help in writing this article.

References

1. Ainslie, D. C. (2001). Hume's Reflections on the Identity and Simplicity of Mind. *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research*, Published By: International Phenomenological Society, 62(3), 557–578. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.2307/2653536>
2. Baxter, D. L. M. (2017). The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy: Hume on Abstraction and Identity. In Stefano Di Bella and Tad Schmalz (Ed.), *The Problem of Universals in Early Modern Philosophy*, Oxford University Press. Oxford University Press, Oxford.
3. Chitwood, A. (2004). *Death By Philosophy: The Biographical Tradition in the Life and Death of the Archaic Philosophers Empedocles, Heraclitus, and Democritus Hardcover*. University of Michigan Press, United States of America.
4. DEMİRLİ, S. (2019). Hume's Response to Mind-Body Dualism. *Edebiyat Fakültesi*, 238–251.

<https://dergipark.org.tr/tr/download/article-file/710519>

5. Giles, J. (1993). The No-Self Theory: Hume, Buddhism, and Personal Identity. *Philosophy East and West, Published by University of Hawaii Press*, 43(2), 175–200. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1399612>. Accessed
6. Hume, D. (1739). *A Treatise of Human Nature* (L. A. Selby-Bigge, Ed.; 2nd Edition). Oxford University Press, London, Edinburgh, and New York. <https://doi.org/10.1037/12868-000>
7. Locke, J. (1690). An Essay Concerning Human Understanding. In Jim Manis (Ed.), *The Philosophical Review* (1st Edition). Copyright © 1999 The Pennsylvania State University, US. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2179386>
8. Mendis, N. K. G. (2007). *The Questions of King Milinda* (N. K. G Mendis and Bhikkhu Bodhi, Ed.; 2nd Edition). Buddhist Publication Society, Kandy, Sri Lank.
9. Pears, D. (1975). Hume's Account of Personal Identity. *Philosophic Exchange, State University of New York Press*, 6(1), 15–26. http://digitalcommons.brockport.edu/phil_ex/vol6/iss1/6
10. Perry, J. (2009). Hume and Frege on identity. *Philosophical Studies, Springer*, 146(3), 413–423. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11098-009-9431-5>
11. Stroud, B. (1977). *Hume* (Ted Honderich, Ed.; 1st Edition). Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London and New York.
12. Swartz, N. (2001). *Beyond Experience: Metaphysical Theories and Philosophical Constraints* (Norman Swartz, Ed.; 2nd ed.). Simon Fraser University Press, Canada.
13. Toyoshima, F., Barton, A., & Grenier, O. (2020). Foundations for an Ontology of Belief, Desire and Intention. *11th International Conference on Formal Ontology in Information Systems*, 140–154. <https://doi.org/10.3233/faia200667i>
14. Yang, S. (2018). Hume's second thoughts on personal identity*. *Problemos*, 94, 182–193. <https://doi.org/10.15388/Problemos.0.0.12005>