

### ***On David Hume's "Of Personal Identity"***

Throughout the years, it has been debated among philosophers as to what a "self" is and what it may be comprised of. Several theories have evolved over time that offer some explanation as to what a self is. Generally, depending on whether a philosopher is an empiricist or a rationalist may give some insight as to the nature of their theory and from what foundation their beliefs are set in. An empiricist will only promote theories that can be supported by physical evidence or observations. Contrary to this is the rationalist who believes that the senses are unreliable, and therefore only promote theories conforming to logic and reason.

That brings us to David Hume, an empiricist, who like other empiricists, only relies on, and promotes theories supported by physical evidence. He disagrees with Descartes on the belief that the self is a nonphysical substance. Hume believes instead that the self is a nonphysical substance. Hume believes instead that what people mistake for a self is nothing more than a collection of impressions and ideas. I will examine and explain his position, and then argue against his belief based on the ideas that all ideas must have an impression from which to be derived, the self must be derived from an impression, and since no such impression exists, there can be no self; and finally based on the idea that the self can be derived from emotions.

The passage comes from a larger work entitled "A Treatise of Human Nature". He begins by asking that from what impression is the idea of a self derived from. "It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea" (Hume, 251). By stating this and if we know anything about Hume, we know that Hume believes that there are two

types of perceptions of the mind, impressions and ideas. Impressions are direct perceptions and ideas. Impressions are direct perceptions of things, people, and etc. that are directly supported by sensory contact. The next types of perceptions are ideas that are copies of impressions not directly supported by sensory contact. An example of this would be to look at a tree, which would give one an impression of a tree. Then, if later, someone would ask him or her to imagine a tree, and he or she did, then that person would have an idea of a tree provided there was no sensory contact supporting the perception of a tree. Hume believes that all ideas must in some way be supported by an impression. So, Hume wants to know what impression supports the idea of self.

He goes on to say that the idea of self does not evolve from just any one impression, but rather a reference for several impressions. And, if any one impression is supposed to give an idea of a self, that impression must be unchanging throughout the whole course of our lives, which is supposed to be much like the nature of the self, unchanging throughout time. "It must be some one impression that give rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference. 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 supposed to exist after that manner."

The concluding assertion by Hume is that since all emotions and sensations are followed by a different emotion that does not exist simultaneously, and for a self to exist it must be so that a self can only evolve from unchanging, constant impressions, and no such case exists, there is no self. "Pain, and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations succeeded each other, and never exist at the same time. It cannot therefore, be

from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived and consequently there is no such idea. "(Hume, 251-252). In conclusion, his argument is this: There are two types of perceptions of the mind, impressions and ideas. If you have an idea it must be traceable to an impression. There is no one impression that has the same nature as a self, that is unchanging throughout time, therefore there can be no self. His argument is logically sound, however it is within each of the premises that each problem lies.

The first point to which I object against is the fact that to have an idea it must be traceable to an impression. It is true in most cases, except for in certain cases such as blindness, where the blind can learn how to draw, or create artwork. A sketch artist can draw a fairly accurate representation of a person based on a description of him or her. Also, children and most adults can imagine fantastic creatures and places told to them in a story, without ever having seen such a creature or place. His idea that all ideas must have a connection to some impression generally is true for all things physical in nature. However, for some things such as emotions we do not have a direct sensory connection to an impression. We may have an idea of what happiness is if someone were to ask what it is, but we could not show him or her a picture or take him or her to a place where we could see happiness. Hume does not consider the possibility of the self possessing non-physical qualities.

The second objection to Hume is his assertion that the idea of a self must be derived from an impression, and since no such impression exists that is like the self (unchanging in time), there can be no self. The fundamental problem in his assertion is the assumption that the idea of a self is unchanging throughout time. Since the idea that

the self is unchanging throughout time is only an idea, he assumes that this is the case and only argues against the idea of a self provided this is true. He does allow for the fact that the self could and quite possibly changes throughout time. Later in his paper he describes the mind as being a “kind of theatre, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, re-pass, glide away and mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations”(Hume, 253). This sentence is stating his position that one can not derive the idea of a self from any of these images. However, the mind does not just flash images, it interprets them in certain ways. A classic example is if two people were to look at a glass with half of its capacity taken up by water. One person may say, “ the glass is half full,” the other may say that “the glass is half empty”. We would then say that the former person is an optimist and the latter a pessimist. The exact same impression involved in this situations, however two different interpretations resulted. This is true for many impressions, such as the famous Rorschach inkblot test in which ink is spilled on a piece of paper in some sort of ambiguous shape. Psychiatrists have asked a subject what he or she sees in the ink, and have gotten several responses from a leaf to a moth to a demonic face. If all the mind did was show images much like a movie screen shows a movie, then how would Hume explain all the different interpretations of things.

Hume asserted that emotions since all emotions never exist at the same time; we cannot derive an idea of a self from these emotions. If we took a random sample of several different people all from different backgrounds, some may have lived a life filled with more joy than others, more pain than others, more sadness or excitement than others. Chances are that these emotions all though they may not have occurred all at once in these people, they probably had an effect in one way or another on these people’s

beliefs and attitudes. Or if two people had an encounter with spiders or dogs when they were younger, one person may have been bitten or chased, while the other may have had a much more pleasant experience. These experiences characterized by the emotions felt within them would have had some effect one way or another on each person.

My belief is that the self is partly non-physical and partly physical. It is not just contained within the mind or body, because if the two were separated then we would say that the person is not the same. I agree most with William James' Principles of Psychology in which he says the self is made up of several dimensions, which are all a person can call theirs. The four dimensions are the material self, the social self, the spiritual self, and the ego. The material self includes bodies, clothes, and possessions; The social self is how others perceive you; the spiritual self is the part that does the thinking and overrides sensory data. The ego is the pure principal of personal identity, which includes intimacy, and warmth. This theory seems to most encompass my belief of a self that is both physical and non physical.

Hume's argument has some strengths in that it does not speculate like many theories do, and is in search of evidence to support each claim. However, with a question of self, it can only be speculated as to what its nature is like since so many theories exist, each with its own strengths and weaknesses. Hume's theory has explained a piece of the pie that self is which is the empirical slice. His theory is a good starting point from which a better, all encompassing theory can be developed.