

THE SELF AND THERAPY

David Hume:
The Self as
Illusion

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e-Book 2016 International Psychotherapy Institute

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David Hume: The Self as Illusion

David Hume (1711-1776) is a fascinating figure in the history of thought. Usually classified as a skeptic, he spent little time in philosophy, abandoning it at the age of 29 in the belief that he had said what he had to say about its problems and questions. He thought he had found philosophical truth. He spent the rest of his life writing the history of England from a Tory point of view and a more popular account of his philosophy. The son of a lawyer who wished him to be the same, Hume tried business, diplomacy, and then became the librarian of the University of Edinburgh Law School. His simplified, popular account of his philosophy did indeed sell much better, but it did not bring him the recognition or financial reward he craved.

Philosophy in the 18th century was not written for a specialized academic audience. The reign of the professors came later. Hume, like many of his contemporaries, was a gentleman scholar who wrote for an educated lay audience. Except for lacking the means, he was typical of the type. Hume supplemented his resources with civil service and diplomatic and academic pursuits. Being a Scot, Hume was somewhat of an outsider in English society, and perhaps his skepticism in intellectual matters bears some relationship to the natural skepticism of a provincial toward the mores and conventions of the capital, although Hume was a conservative in politics. Be this as it may, Hume was influenced by the atmosphere of the University of Edinburgh, particularly by the thought of his friend, the great economist Adam Smith. What Hume was skeptical about was the claims of reason.

Hume shared and exemplified the 18th-century distrust of “enthusiasm.” Enthusiasm had led to dissension, persecution, and civil war. The 18th century would have none of it. I find this skepticism admirable in politics and religion, but problematic when applied to our topic, the self. Hume embodies a contradiction, or at least a deep conflict, between the distrust of enthusiasm—passionately held convictions—and the recognition of the power of emotion (which he calls sentiment) in human life. Indeed, this belief in the primacy of the passions is one of the cornerstones of his philosophy. There is also a conflict between his epistemological skepticism, his questioning of the grounds of our belief that we really know what we think we know, and his intellectual ambitions, which are nothing less than to put

what we would call social science, or perhaps psychology, on as firm a basis as Newtonian physics, by discovering the general laws that regulate human thought and action.

Hume's temperament was congruent with his philosophizing. He wrote the following self-obituary, or "funeral oration" as he called it, of himself during his final illness. It is remarkably calm and dispassionate for a man on his deathbed.

To conclude historically with my own character I am, or rather was (and that is the style I must use when speaking of myself which emboldens me the more to speak my sentiments), I was I say a man of mild disposition, of command of temper, of an open, social and cheerful humor, capable of detachment but little susceptible to enmity, and of great moderation in all my passions. Even my love of literary fame, my ruling passion, never soured my temper, not withstanding my frequent disappointments. My company was not unacceptable to the young and careless as well as to the studious and the literary; and as I took a particular pleasure in the company of modest women, I had no reason to be displeas'd with the reception I met with from them. In a word though most men, otherwise eminent, have found reason to complain of calumny, I never was touch'd, or even attack'd by her baleful tooth; and though I wantonly expos'd myself to the rage of both civil and religious factions, they seem to be disarm'd in my behalf of their wonted fury. (Hume, 1775/1911a, p. viii)

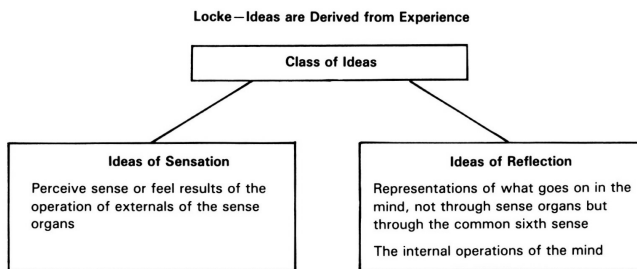
To me, Hume sounds like Henry Higgins here: contemplative, above it all, a bit silly, except he is, here, facing death with aplomb and aristocratic calm.

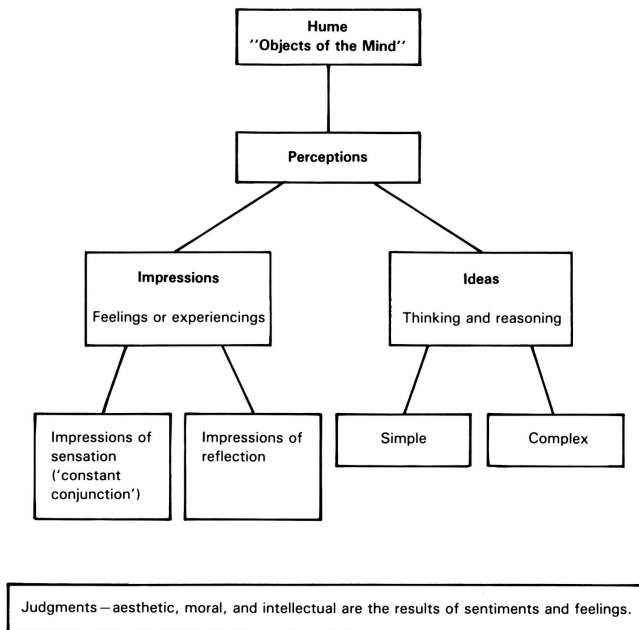
Hume set out to apply the experimental method of reasoning to human affairs, to parallel Newton's experimental method. As the heir of the 17th-century scientific revolution and of the empiricism of Locke, Hume was, like Freud and Marx after him, looking for extremely general truths about human beings. He set out to do for humanistic study—social science—what Newton had done for physical science. Being a strict empiricist, he did this by examining how the mind works. Hume was not actually as empirical as he thought, and clearly some of what he thought he saw when he examined the operation of the mind was more determined by a priori ideas or assumptions than by observation. In short, his psychology doesn't really stand up, not because his method is too empirical, but because it is not empirical enough. Be this as it may, what Hume thought he observed as mental contents were actually *perceptions*. He also calls them *objects of the mind*. Percepts are atomistic. They are discrete. Percepts are not connected to each other. They are essentially sensations—sensations such as sounds, colors, pressures, tastes, odors, and other tactile quallae. Each is an entity in itself, experienced as itself. Hume divided perceptions into two classes: impressions and ideas. Hume's impressions are much like Locke's ideas of sensation. They are mental contents. Locke divides ideas into ideas of sensation and ideas of reflection. Hume divides objects

of the mind (perceptions) into impressions and ideas.

The impressions are felt or experienced. They are of two kinds: (a) impressions of sensations that, like Locke's ideas of sensation, are the result of the external world acting on the sense organs and (b) impressions of reflection, which are memories and fantasies. Hume had difficulty distinguishing the two—not in practice, but in theory—and finally fell back on vividness and immediacy to distinguish impressions of external reality (sensations) from impressions of reflection. The issue here is reality testing, and Hume's differential doesn't really work. Descartes's demon could be fooling him, and some sensations are faint while some memories are vivid and intense. In the *Treatise* (1738/1911b) Hume recognizes this and has recourse to impressions of sensations carrying their own labels; they just feel different than ideas of reflection. From a logical standpoint this is obviously unsatisfactory. However, from Hume's point of view this isn't too important. He believes that the claims of reason are highly inflated and the motive of his philosophizing is to expose the fragility and limitations of human reason. He is skeptical not because he doesn't believe that we have practical knowledge sufficient for living everyday life, but because he distrusts the claims of the philosophers. He wants to be reasonable rather than rational, and in the final analysis relies on sentiment and custom to validate a great deal. It is feeling and sentiment that determine human action. Belief is "nothing but a more vivid and intense conception of any idea." It is a difference in feeling. He goes on to say, "Reason is ... the slave of the passions, and never pretends to any other office than to serve and obey them" (1738/1911b, p. 12). Here Hume is again anticipating Freud, not only in reaching for extremely general principles on which to found a science of human behavior, but, more saliently, in demonstrating how thin a reed is reason and how little it determines our actions—how little influence it really has over human life. Hume demonstrates this with his epistemological analysis, and Freud does it through clinical analysis; both men use their respective analyses to build a structural theory of the workings of the human mind. In Descartes's schema man was free, free to will what he wanted—most desirably the rational—while nature was mechanistic. Not so for Hume, who wants a science of man that in the end is just as mechanistic as Descartes's nature. Hume's science of man discredits man as the "rational animal." Hume does this by looking at the origin of our beliefs and by examining their foundation in reason. Generally speaking, Hume finds that the alleged foundation in reason is wanting and falls back on the genesis of ideas and beliefs in feelings, sentiments, and customs.

For Hume, perceptions include ideas as well as impressions. Hume's ideas are unlike either Locke's or Plato's; they are neither the general class of mental contents (Locke) nor the archetypes of particulars (Plato), but rather are mental operations. Ideas are both the objects of and constituents of our thinking and reasoning. They are not psychological, like Locke's ideas of reflection, but logical. Ideas are relations for Hume. Mathematical proofs are the purest case of the Humeian idea. Mathematical ideas have relations to each other. Once we know the meaning of addition and the meaning of number, we know that $2 + 2 = 4$. We know it by reasoning about the relation of (here, mathematical) ideas.





Hume now has his epistemological schema. There are impressions of sensation, impressions of reflection, and ideas. These are the only sources of human knowledge. He is, if anything, even more radically empirical than Locke. Sensations and impressions are not really connected; they are atoms of experience. In his famous analysis of causality, Hume says that we perceive no “real” connections between impressions; rather, we infer connections because in the past the impressions have always been in “constant conjunction.” However, there is absolutely no rational reason to believe that this will be the case in the future. We never perceive the connection between impressions.

There is nothing in any object, considered in itself, which can afford us a reason for drawing a conclusion beyond it; so that even after the observation of the frequent or constant conjunction of objects, we have no reason to draw any inference concerning any object beyond those of which we have had experience. (1738/1911b, p. 139)

He goes on to say,

Whenever any individual of any species of objects is found by experience to be constantly united with an individual of another species, the appearance of any new individuals of either species naturally conveys the thought of its usual attendant. (Hume, 1738/1911b, p. 93)

Observation of constant conjunctions leads to “unity in the imagination” (1738/1911b, p. 93). Hume now has his equivalent of Newton’s Gravitation. The association of ideas is the force that relates atomistic impressions. They are associated by constant conjunction, habit, and custom. The objects of the mind, impressions, come from the outside, from the memory, or from the imagination, which can form complex ideas à la Locke, and are related, operated on, by the laws of association. Hardly a rational procedure or a rational notion of the working of the mind. In working with ideas, the mind is somewhat more rational, but it can only determine the relationships among its own ideas (concepts), which have no intrinsic application to the world (to external reality). Perceptions (atoms) and association (force) constitute our mental life, along with conceptual reasoning, which is essentially tautological (i.e., only makes explicit inherent meanings). Now Hume has his psychology based on principles of great generality.

Hume has another model for science, for his psychology, besides Newton. That he found in the writings of his friend and later colleague at the University of Edinburgh, Adam Smith. Adam Smith, the first of the classical economists, viewed man as atomistic. In his economic function, each man acts in his own self-interest and tries to maximize his profit. This is admittedly a far more “rational” account of man than Hume’s. But is it? Is self-interest rational? In a sense, yes, but not in another sense, because it is driven by passion. In that sense, Smith’s view of man is rationally irrational, just as Hume says reason is the slave of the passions. Furthermore, Smith has his gravitational force, which he calls the “invisible hand.” This hand is the “market” and its laws. The invisible hand somehow “rationalizes” the atomistic, solipsistic, nonsocially motivated economic life of each isolate, so that the seemingly discordant individual notes turn out to be felicitously harmonious. The result is maximum productivity that accrues to the general good. Individualism is, in the final analysis, socially beneficent through the efforts of the invisible hand. Finally, Adam Smith theorizes about the specialization of labor—again an isolating, atomistic activity in which the individual laborer never completes the gestalt, never sees the product as a whole—as a way to maximize productivity. Each turn of the screw on the primitive production lines of the 18th century is an atom of economic productive reality, however fragmenting and alienating such labor may be, and somehow the atoms make a bigger pie. Whatever one may think of Smith’s sweeping

analysis of, and apology for, capitalism (he was not unaware of the inequities inherent in it), there is clearly some connection between the social forces that he both depicts and rationalizes in his theory and Hume's view of the human mind and its operations. The association of ideas is not only Hume's force of gravitation; it is his invisible hand. The economic activity of the medieval guild member is clearly different from the economic activity of a factory production worker, and so are the accounts of human nature that emerge from the two disparate social-economic schemes. One is organic, with intense connectiveness, while the other is atomistic and alienated, with no intrinsic connection between workers, just as there is no intrinsic connection between Hume's impressions. Clearly, there is a reciprocal relationship between ideology (including philosophy) and social reality. Each determines, at least in part, the other. Although it is true that Adam Smith did not publish his masterpiece, *The Wealth of Nations* (Smith, 1776/1936), until 1776, the year of Hume's death, the two men knew each other, and Hume must have been conversant with Smith's ideas. Ultimately, one could view Hume's epistemology and Smith's economics as reflections of the same social, intellectual, and economic conditions—as part of the same Zeitgeist.

Hume was nothing if not consistent. He drew the logical conclusion from his philosophizing, his epistemology, and wrote, "Does a book contain matters of fact or reasoning about the relation of ideas. If not, consign it to flames."

This brings us to Hume's analysis of the self. Given his skepticism and his analysis of experience as discontinuous, it is hardly surprising that the self does not fare very well in Hume's hands. For him, there are only two ways that we could know the self, as an impression (i.e., as a datum of experience) or as a relation of ideas. Clearly that self is not a relation of ideas, so it is either experiential (i.e., an impression of sensation or of reflection) or unknowable. It is logically possible that the self could exist, but that we could not know it. Hume's is an epistemological, not an ontological, skepticism; that is, his doubts are about human nature, the potentiality of the human mind for the acquisition of rational knowledge, not about the existence of things themselves. For Hume, however, this isn't a real issue; he is interested in what we can know, not in what we cannot know. Since Hume implicitly eliminates the self as a relation of ideas, he is left to determine if we have an impression of the self. He does this so succinctly and precisely that I will let him speak for himself:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on some particular perception or another, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I can never catch myself at any time without a perception, I can never observe anything but the perception. When my perceptions are removed for any time as by sound sleep, so long am I insensible of myself, can I truly be said not to exist. . . .

I may venture to affirm to the rest of mankind that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which exceed each other with an incredible rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement. . . .

The mind is a kind of theater, where several perceptions successively make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, mingle in an infinite variety of postures and situations. . . . The comparison of the theater must not mislead us. There are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place where these scenes are represented, or of the materials of which it is composed. . . .

Memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, ... it is to be considered, the source of personal identity . . . [memory gives us], that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person which [we] extend and fill in the gaps. (Hume, 1738/1911b, p. 238)

Hume is indeed incisive. Are you merely a bundle of perceptions? Is all flux and flow like Locke's time as perpetually perishing? Hume says look and see what you find. It is an empirical test. Can you find yourself? Is the mind (here, the self) a show taking place in a theater that doesn't exist, as in Hume's trenchant metaphor? If Hume is right, the self is an illusion, at least from an epistemological point of view. If there is a self, we can't know that there is one, and for all practical purposes Hume has decimated the self. The Humeian self has been called a "bundle self": the self as a bundle of impressions. There is no cord holding the bundle together, so there is no self but the perceptions themselves, and this is no self at all. What are we to conclude from this? In a little more than 100 years, we have gone from Descartes's notion of the self as thinker, as cogitator, as the one self-evident, indubitable reality to Hume's annihilation of the possibility of knowing the self. Has Hume merely slain a late scholasticism, a residual from medieval philosophizing, the self as substance, as the putty in which experience inheres or adheres? I don't think so; I believe that Hume has done more than slay a chimera of interest only to technical philosophers of a certain persuasion. That would be interesting, but essentially a move in a Mandarin game. Rather, Hume is clearly stating that we have no experience of a self. We have experiences, but no experience of the experiencer of these experiences. There is something existential about Hume's conclusions; there is an eeriness to the theater that doesn't exist that is the locus of my experience. This is more than an academic game; it is a reassessment of what it means to be human.

Hume doesn't mean to say that there is no experience of personal identity, but that is something different than a substantial self. By personal identity, Hume doesn't have anything arcane in mind,

simply the subjective experience, the idea (of reflection), that we are the same, that we have continuity over time. In this he follows Locke; when he introspects, he doesn't find a self, but he does find the "idea" of personal identity. He then asks what is the source of this idea, and answers that it is memory alone that gives us a sense of personal identity. We extend ourselves forward in imagination and use imagination to fill in the gaps in past experience. Essentially we create a continuity that doesn't exist in the impressions themselves and consolidate a sense of identity—the closest Hume comes to allowing us a self. It is resemblance, contiguity, and causation (or the illusion of it) that are the raw materials that memory (and imagination) use to build a sense of ongoingness, of continuity, and of identity. This is strikingly similar to the function of feeling, sentiment, and habit, rather than reason or experience, in generating our expectations of order, causality, and ongoingness in the external world. In the end, both self and world, or at least our belief in them, are irrational (i.e., not based on reason or given in experience). For Hume, I, although I don't exist, am constituted, insofar as I am constituted, by the activity of my memory. Personal identity is, for Hume, the result of what a psychoanalyst would call the synthetic function of the ego. The self is illusion; identity is a construct.

Hume is hard to refute. When you introspect, do you find yourself, or at least a self? I don't. So my contention that I do have a self either is erroneous or has some other basis. Of course, when I introspect, I do not find that my perceptions are individual atoms, so perhaps Hume is empirically wrong; the interconnectedness is a given, or is at least more of a given than Hume would allow. Be that as it may, it is hard to read Hume's analysis of the notion of the self without feeling yourself (pardon the expression) disappearing.

Hume's analysis of the self brings to mind the story of the philosopher and the theologian, with Hume playing the role of the philosopher and those who uphold the substantiality of the self, particularly of the self as substance, as a substrate of experience, as the theologian. The two esteemed gentlemen are engaged in debate. The theologian says to the philosopher, "You are like a blind man looking for a black cat that isn't there in a coal bin at midnight." "Agreed," says the philosopher, "but you would have found it." Hume would rather grope in the dark and fail to find the cat than demonstrate under the theologian's illumination that the cat, who really isn't there, is there: skeptic versus believer, with the skeptic paradoxically upholding the value of the truth, no matter how disconcerting. Hume is one of those modern thinkers who has been described as a "dark enlightener." The dark enlighteners are

all those who expose the futility and illusionary qualities of our most cherished beliefs. Kant, on his critical side; Nietzsche, Marx, and Freud also belong to the ranks of the dark illuminators.

Hume's elimination of self as experience has been historically influential. The logical positivists, the contemporary heirs of the empirical tradition, agree with Hume that the self is illusion. Some of them have described the self as a "grammatical fiction" arising from mistaking the grammatical subject, the *I*, for an existent. This has reverberations in the ideologies of the modern collectivities. It is ironic that one spin-off of the individualistic notions of the 18th century, already paradoxical in Hume, has been the obviation of the self as individual existence in those collectivities. In Arthur Koestler's (1941) novel *Darkness at Noon*, a story about the Russian purge trials, the protagonist, Rubashov, is an idealist who sees himself as existing only to actualize the historical mission of the Party. He regards himself as a grammatical fiction, the *ontos on*, the real reality being history, the Party, and the masses. In the course of the novel, he is destroyed by the Party to which he has given his life and, in the course of his humiliation and destruction, discovers that that grammatical fiction, himself, is indeed real. Koestler's novel is poignant. Rubashov pleads guilty as a last contribution to the Party and to history. His self-immolation is partly motivated by guilt; he has destroyed many grammatical fictions in the course of his career in the Party. Ironically, his final repudiation of that self-immolation, his discovery that the grammatical fiction is real, coincides with his physical destruction by the regime in which he tried to submerge his egoism and individuality. He regains his individuality just as he loses his life.

Hume certainly did not intend to justify the destruction of the individual by collectivities, but ideas have consequences, and it is perhaps no accident that the century that has been so taken with Hume's style of philosophical analysis, our own, should have produced such extraacademic interpretations of the self as a grammatical fiction, subservient to the aims of the state. I say this knowing that Hume's intellectual heirs are, for the most part, liberal and humanistic in their politics and ethics. Nevertheless, there seems to me to be a connection between proofs that the self doesn't exist and ideologies that act on that proof.

