

# HUME'S THEORY OF PERSONAL IDENTITY AS THE KEY FOR FREUD'S INTERMINABLE ANALYSIS

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Humean critics have long noticed, and have for a long time been extensively writing on, David Hume's alleged dissatisfaction with his theory of personal identity, which is elaborated in Section VI of Part IV of Book I of *A Treatise of Human Nature* and apparently retracted in the *Appendix* to the *Treatise*. In this paper, I do not wish to discuss either whether Hume really was dissatisfied with the account he gives of personal identity in the *Treatise*,<sup>1</sup> or, if he indeed was dissatisfied, what reasons he could have had to feel that way.<sup>2</sup> For the purposes of this essay, Hume's theory of personal identity is taken at face value as it is detailed in the *Treatise*; his possible misgivings, as they are expressed in the *Appendix*, are not discussed here.

What I shall not do as well is to identify and discuss other errors and inconsistencies (that is, those not identified by Hume) of Hume's theory of personal identity.<sup>3</sup> Rather, I wish to draw attention to the fact that Sigmund Freud uses — very probably unbeknownst to himself — the core of Hume's conception of personal identity when he talks about the circumstances in which analysis, in an “ambitious” sense, should come to an end. Before I delve into what *prima facie* looks like a surprising connection between Hume and Freud I shall briefly sketch both authors' theories; It is important, however, to emphasize, from the outset, that Hume's

theory of the self and Freud's theory of mental activity are not exactly the same, as Freud's theory is much more complex than Hume's since it discusses features of the human mind which do not concern Hume at all. What I mean to show in this essay is merely that Hume's theory may be advantageously used as a theoretical tool in the discussion of whether Freudian analysis can successfully come to an end.

While discussing whether analysis can successfully come to an end, Freud alludes to an “ambitious” meaning of the phrase “the end of analysis.” This meaning is stated as follows:

It prompts the query whether the patient has been influenced to the point that no further change can be expected from continuing analysis. It is as though through analysis you could reach a level of absolute psychological normality, which can, furthermore, be trusted to remain stable; when, for example, all occurrences of repression have been resolved and *all gaps in memory filled in*. (Freud 2002, 176 — my italics.)

In order thus for analysis to successfully come to an end, the analyst has to be satisfied that the patient has reached a state of psychological normality whose likelihood of remaining stable is high, and therefore it is unprofitable to continue with the treatment. Freud seems to suggest that

the resolution of all occurrences of repression and the filling in of all gaps in memory are mere instances of the capacity of the mind to remain stable after psychological normality has been attained, which suggests that there are other instances allowing the state of psychological normality to come about. Occurrences of repression, gaps in memory and other circumstances here unnamed by Freud are causes of neurosis. A cursory glance at some of the most important texts written by Freud dealing with this subject indicates, however, that repression is not a mere example of a cause, but *the* cause of neurosis. “The state in which the ideas existed before being made conscious is called *repression*” (Freud 2010, 4). This means that “repression” is the term which designates ideas that have been repressed, i.e. which have been made unconscious (e.g. as the result of a psychologically traumatic experience) but impact negatively on conscious life. The struggle between the unconscious memories and conscious life provokes the conflict Freud designates by the term “neurosis,” which suggests repression is not just one among several possible causes of neurotic illness, but the one cause to which all neurotic illness can be traced.

According to Hume, the idea of the self cannot be derived from any one impression because no impression remains invariably the same throughout one’s life, unlike what happens with the self, which “is suppos’d to exist after that manner” (Hume 2010, 251). Since the self cannot be derived from any impression, “consequently there is no such idea” (Hume 2010, 252). This conclusion accords with one of the more prominent features of the theory of ideas to which Hume adheres: that “every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it, and every simple impression a correspondent idea” (Hume 2010, 3). Moreover, “*all our simple ideas in their first appearance, are derived from simple impressions, which are correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent*” (Hume 2010,

4). Hume leaves no room for doubt whether it is ideas that come from impressions or impressions that come from ideas, as he explicitly asserts that “the simple impressions always take the precedence of their correspondent ideas, but never appear in the contrary order” (Hume 2010, 5). Therefore, if there are no simple *invariable* impressions, no idea of the self (which would necessarily be invariable) can be derived from them, and thus there is no simple idea of the self. This does not mean, of course, that the self does not exist; it simply means that the self is neither an impression nor an idea, “but that to which our several impressions and ideas are suppos’d to have a reference” (Hume 2010, 251). It is not entirely clear, at least at first sight, what Hume means by “reference” in this context, but certain passages from the section of the *Treatise* in which this theory is developed hint at a possible answer. As Barry Stroud remarks,

[s]ince every perception is distinguishable from every other, there is no contradiction involved in supposing, of some particular perception, that it exists separately from every other perception which belongs to the same bundle. For a perception to be perceived or felt is just for it to be present to a mind, but since according to Hume a mind is nothing but a bundle or collection of perceptions, it is possible for a perception to exist independently of any mind, and therefore possible for it to exist unperceived. (Stroud 2005, 107)

According to Stroud’s reading, for Hume the mind is a bundle or collection of perceptions. There are perceptions which belong to different minds and even perceptions which belong to no mind at all. Hume indeed says as much when he asserts that all perceptions “are different, and distinguishable, and separable from each other, and may be separately consider’d, and may exist separately, and have no need of any thing to support their existence” (Hume 2010, 252). One mind, or the self, is therefore no more or less

than a *specific, independent* set, bundle or collection of different perceptions which are bound together by something which distinguishes them from other *specific, independent* sets of perceptions. Fifteen perceptions, for example, exist separately.

There is something that makes us say, for instance, that five of those perceptions belong to mind A, three to mind B, two to mind C and five to no mind at all. The difficulty lies thus in finding out what this “something” is. Hume argues that it is memory<sup>4</sup>:

(...) the memory not only discovers the identity, but also contributes to its production, by producing the relation of resemblance among the perceptions. (Hume 2010, 261)

As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, ‘tis to be consider’d, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never shou’d have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person. But having once acquired this notion of causation from the memory, we can extend the same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our memory, and can comprehend times, and circumstances, and actions, which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have existed. (Hume 2010, 261-262)

(...) memory does not so much *produce* as *discover* personal identity, by shewing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. (Hume 2010, 262)

The first of these passages establishes the role of memory for the relation of resemblance, the other two for the relation of causation. Memory plays no role for the relation of contiguity as the latter must be dropped in this circumstance, although Hume does not explain why (Hume 2010, 260). As far as the relation of resemblance is concerned, memory is fundamental, as it is both re-

sponsible for the discovery of identity and for the production of the relation of resemblance among the perceptions. As for the relation of causation, memory is no less fundamental, as effects are perceived as coming from causes, and causes as originating effects, simply due to the fact that human beings can remember past successions of perceptions, thus being enabled to perceive the relation of causation amongst different perceptions. The self is thus constituted by a bundle of perceptions which a single mind perceives and are united together because the mind remembers successions of perceptions which have occurred in the past; it is memory that establishes resemblance and causation among perceptions which otherwise would go unperceived and therefore would belong to no mind at all. Memory is the “something” that binds different, independent perceptions, and makes them part of the same bundle, that is, of the same mind.

Here the similarities between Hume’s and Freud’s ideas start to become more and more apparent. For Hume, the mind is a bundle of perceptions bound together by memory; for Freud, the mind is an apparatus “whose parts we shall call *agencies* or, to put it more concretely, *systems*” (Freud 2008, 350). These systems are in “a firm sequence [which] can be set up by establishing that in certain psychical processes the systems go through a definite temporal sequence in their arousal,” which makes it necessary to “ascribe to the apparatus one sensory and one motor end.” In the former there is “a system [which] is located for receiving our sense-perceptions,” whereas in the latter “there is another [system] which opens the floodgates to motor activity” (Freud 2008, 350). Both Hume and Freud assert that perceptions are a necessary condition of human beings’ having ideas; both authors also ascribe to memory an essential role in the process of idea formation. As Freud says,

[a] trace of the perceptions impinging upon us remains in our psychical apparatus, and this we can

call a “*memory-trace*”. Indeed, we call the function relating to this memory-trace our “memory”. If we are serious about intending to link psychical processes to systems, then the memory-trace can only consist in permanent alterations to the elements of the systems. (Freud 2008, 351)

It seems to me that there is a strong resemblance between Freud’s “memory-trace” and Hume’s explanation according to which “ideas are preceded by other more lively perceptions, from which they are derived, and which they represent” (Hume 2010, 22). Ideas are therefore less lively in the mind than impressions because the former are derived from memory, whereas the latter come directly from the senses. This seems to imply that for Hume there are memories of impressions, which makes it possible for ideas to originate, but the impressions themselves do not have memory. This is exactly what Freud argues as well:

We assume that an outermost system of the apparatus is the receptor for the perceptual stimuli, but that it does not retain anything of them, that is, it has no memory; we assume too that behind this system there is a second one that transforms the momentary excitation of the first into permanent traces. (Freud 2008, 351)

As I said in the introduction, it is obvious Hume’s theory of the self and Freud’s theory of mental activity are not the same; it is equally obvious Freud’s theory is much more complex than Hume’s, as it traces divisions in the mind, which, as Freud correctly points out, do not correspond to “a real spatial arrangement for the psychical systems” (Freud 2008, 350). Despite all these differences, what is nevertheless uncanny – because Freud never quotes Hume or otherwise acknowledges his work – is Freud’s reliance on something which is *the* tenet of Hume’s philosophy of the mind, the process of “association”:

Were ideas entirely loose and unconnected, chance alone wou’d join them; and ‘tis impossible the same simple ideas should fall regularly into complex ones (as they commonly do) without some bond of union among them, some associating quality, by which one idea naturally introduces another. This uniting principle among ideas is not to be consider’d as an inseparable connexion; for that has been already excluded from the imagination: nor yet are we to conclude, that without it the mind cannot join two ideas; for nothing is more free than that faculty: but we are only to regard it as a gentle force (...); nature in a manner pointing out to every one those simple ideas, which are most proper to be united into a complex one. The qualities, from which this association arises, and by which the mind is after this manner convey’d from one idea to another, are three, *viz. resemblance, contiguity* in time or place, and *cause* and *effect*. (...) [T]hese qualities produce an association among ideas, and, upon the appearance of one idea naturally introduce another. (Hume 2010, 10-11)

We know that there is something else we retain permanently from the perceptions impinging upon the *Per.* [perceptual] system besides their content. Our perceptions also turn out to be linked to one another in our memory, above all if they occurred at the same time. We call this fact *association*. Now it is clear that if the *Per.*-system *has no memory at all* [my italics], it cannot retain the traces for association either (...). So we must assume (...) that the basis for association is the memory-system. (Freud 2008, 351-352)

For both Hume and Freud association, which is only possible because human beings have memory, is the source of ideas, or, better yet, we humans have ideas because we associate past events, or perceptions, and this is only possible because we are able to remember them. Since some perceptions, according to Freud, are repressed, analysis becomes necessary in order to

fill in the gaps in memory produced by the repression of a given memory. Neurosis would be like a missing or faulty cog in the machinery to which we call “mind,” or “self,” and its presence (which makes the memory either absent or distorted) prevents the normal operations of the mind as Hume and Freud describe them.

Freud, even if he does so unwittingly, ends up arguing that analysis should come to an end whenever the patient is again capable of making associations the way Hume describes human beings actually do it, that is, by appealing to (unimpeded) memory. The neurotic patient is hindered by the fact that there are gaps in his memory, and so the associations he makes are bound to provoke unnecessary anxiety — unnecessary since it stems just from not remembering, and not from a problem which originates outside of the patient’s mind. Freud mentions in passing

that it is necessary “to consult first of all your own experience, to see” if there are instances in which all the gaps in memory have been filled in, which entails the resolution of all occurrences of repression, and then that it is equally necessary to consult “the theory, to see if it is at all possible in the first place” (Freud 2002, 176). Freud might have not had Hume in mind when he wrote this, and Hume certainly does not write about neurosis, the fact that it may impede the functioning of human nature as he describes it, or whether it is possible to recover from it, but the theory, that is, Hume’s theory, shows that human beings’ default position (that is, before repression and the onset of acute neurosis) is the capacity to associate perceptions through unimpeded memory. Freud’s theory is that analysis is the tool which may allow patients to resume “normality,” that is, their (according to Hume) default position.

## NOTES

- 1 Corliss Gayda Swain, for example, argues that the “presupposition (...) that Hume discovered some reason to be dissatisfied with his account — is false,” and that “Hume did not write the section of the Appendix dealing with personal identity in order to raise new questions about the adequacy of his book 1 account of the mind; he wrote it in order to defend that account by showing that alternative explanations of personal identity are incoherent” (Swain 1991, 107).
- 2 Barry Stroud surveys some of those reasons while suggesting that Hume’s dissatisfaction stems mainly from the fact that Hume “senses not just an explanatory deficiency in his account of the origin of the idea of the self, but a certain vicious circularity in his whole scheme for the science of man” (Stroud 2005, 134), because in order “[t]o explain the idea of causality, personal identity is appealed to; and to explain the idea of personal identity, causality is appealed to” (Stroud 2005, 135). Hume cannot get rid of causality simply because causality is one of the important pillars of the theory of ideas to which Hume is committed and on which he bases all his scheme of the functioning of human nature. On this point see Stroud 2005, 17-41. Stroud’s reading of Hume’s reasons for dissatisfaction with his account of personal identity can be found on pages 127-140.
- 3 The research on personal identity in general, and in Hume in particular, is very extensive. I would like to recommend, for those who wish to explore the subject in detail, three recent monographs: Baxter, Donald. *Hume’s difficulty: Time and identity in the Treatise*. London, UK: Routledge, 2008. Strawson, Galen. *The evident connexion: Hume on personal identity*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2013. Garrett, Don. *Hume*. London, UK: Routledge, 2015. Each of these volumes mentions some of the relevant research on the topic.
- 4 Naturally, this is only applicable to perceptions which make up a distinct, specific set of perceptions, that is, a mind. Perceptions which belong to no mind at all are boundless, i.e. they are not bound together by memory (or by anything else); it is precisely the total absence of memory that makes it possible to say that a given perception does not belong to any mind at all.

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