INDIVIDUATION AND CAUSALITY IN HUME

by

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INDIVIDUATION AND CAUSALITY IN HUME

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Abstract

Identity requires change. This conclusion is derived from David Hume’s treatment of identity in Book One of the *Treatise*. My argument takes Hume’s treatment of identity as part of a larger program, namely an effort to reconcile the idea that experience is not intrinsically an experience of anything, that it just simply is *what it is*, with the need to justify our natural trust in our senses.

I argue that Hume, in revealing what he describes as a “contradiction” in the principles underlying our understanding of identity, frees the notion of identity from the notion of *an unchanging, indivisible unity*. I argue further that Hume distinguishes two principles, one positive and one negative, that lead us to attribute identity. These principles, together with his arguments from usage, provide the materials from which I conclude that identity requires change.
Dedication

To R.E. Jennings
Acknowledgments

I want to express my gratitude to Ray Jennings for his advice, his guidance, his time, and his encouragement throughout the preparation of this manuscript, to David UU for his unfailing support, to Norman Swartz for his helpful criticisms, to Larry Resnick for his direction to some pertinent passages in Wittgenstein, to Phil Hanson for his comments, to Jeffrey Foss for his suggestions, and to Tannis Braithwaite and the other graduate students who responded to an early presentation of the thesis.
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Introduction

Hume's treatment of the concept of *identity* may usefully be described as an attempt to free one idea from another. The notion that there is something identifiable that remains unchanged in the midst of change and that the identity of objects is in each case constituted by something unchanging binds together two distinguishable ideas: that of an *individual* with that of an *unchanging, indivisible unity*. The applicability of this description is evident from a careful reading of the *Treatise*. In what are called his 'sceptical arguments', Hume is largely concerned with revealing what he considers to be the unsatisfactory implications arising from the close connection between these two ideas.

Hume's treatment of *identity* is part of a larger program, an attempt to reconcile the view that experience has its own isolated, independent character with the need to justify our "implicit faith in our senses". He tries to derive both sides of the subject-object dualism purely from what is available to conscious awareness. Hume also tries to account for how we come to individuate objects from empirical evidence. Hume's work in Book One of the *Treatise* is a story about how our ordinary world is derived from phenomenal experience. His doctrines are not problem-free. My main interest in this essay, however, is not to add to the list of complaints about these problems, but to focus on how Hume arrives at a remarkable and interesting solution to an enduring problem of individuation.

Hume's program is not one of conceptual analysis, that is, he is not engaged in looking for necessary and sufficient conditions for the application of the notion of identity to natural objects. He uses conceptual analysis in implementing his program, to reveal inconsistencies in the

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principles we employ in thinking about identity. Overall, however, his program is one which endeavours to legitimize our trust in empirical evidence.

Chapter One of this essay asserts that Hume’s sceptical arguments effectively deconstruct a particular idea of individual, one which binds the notion of enduring identity to that of an unchanging, indivisible unity. That is, Hume tracks down the internal contradiction that undermines that idea’s claims to coherence. I distinguish three methods that Hume uses in his analysis. First, his genetic account of identity grounds the claim that the notion of an unchanging, indivisible something surviving change is underdetermined by experience. Secondly, I argue that Hume distinguishes two principles that we use to attribute identity, one positive and one negative. Thirdly, Hume reveals that both numerical identity and continued existence—what we might call serial identity or identity through time—are accompanied by a fiction, one of an unchanging something that survives change.

The net effect of Hume’s deconstruction is the freeing of the concept of identity from that fiction. We may trace the roots of this fiction as far back as Aristotle:

But clearly matter also is substance; for in all the opposite changes that occur there is something which underlies the changes, e.g. in respect of place that which is now here and again elsewhere, and in respect of increase that which is now of one size and again less or greater, and in respect of alteration that which is now healthy and again diseased; and similarly in respect of substance there is something that is now being generated and again being destroyed, and now underlies the process as a ‘this’ and again underlies it in respect of a privation of positive character.4

Chapter Two asserts that Hume opens the way toward a more pliable notion of identity. His doctrines drive a wedge between the notion of identity and that of unity, freeing the former from

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2 "... our accustom’d method of examining ideas by considering those impressions, from which they are deriv’d." *Treatise*, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. IV, p. 230.


4 Aristotle, *Metaphysics*, 1041a, l. 32 to 1042b, l. 5.
the latter, without thereby allowing identity to be caught in the opposing pull toward the notion of multiplicity. Hume argues that our ordinary use of the language of identity supports his attempt to free identity from the notion of an unchanging, indivisible unity. He suggests that ‘identity’ is usefully vague and ambiguous; for example, it serves either as the notion of unity or as that of number, depending upon our view. This insight leads him to a remarkably up-to-date conclusion about problems of identity.

Finally, I argue that Hume’s positive and negative principles of identity, together with his arguments from usage, provide the materials for the conclusion that our notion of identity, as applied to natural objects, is one that requires change, for example, the argument that certain kinds of changes are taken for granted, and are in fact necessary to the identity of natural objects.

This essay is part of a larger project. The larger project is an argument toward the general thesis that schemes of individuation are ancillary to the kinds of causal relations we ascribe to objects and events. What I want to say about identity for the present can be established without a very detailed account of Hume’s notion of cause and effect or of what Hume takes to be the relationship between individuation and causality. A detailed account will occupy a substantial portion of the larger project. For now, Hume’s ideas about causality will enter into the discussion only when we encounter them in examining his doctrine of identity.
Chapter One
The Deconstruction of Identity

1.1. The Problem

My introduction suggested that Hume is trying to return to us a trust in empirical evidence, by deriving the notions of subject and object from phenomenal experience alone. In the Treatise, Hume is, in part, trying to reconcile the idea that experience is not intrinsically an experience of anything, that it just simply is what it is, with the need to

establish a system or set of opinions, which if not true (for that, perhaps, is too much to be hop’d for) might at least be satisfactory to the human mind, and might stand the test of the most critical examination.5

He felt deeply despondent,6 disturbed by the implications of his premise that nothing is ever really present to the mind but its own perceptions.7 Under this description, what we ordinarily take as a world of independently existing objects that we see, hear, feel, taste, etc. resolves itself into an ever changing flux of perceptions.8 Perceptions are mind-dependent, subjective, and variable, not the sort of items that one would ordinarily consider to be a basis for knowledge, especially when they are contrasted with the ordinary idea of objects as independent of mind, objectively existing, and stable. But, according to Hume’s doctrine, perceptions, and a particular psychological phenomenon are all we have to work with.

Hume describes the psychological phenomenon:

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7 idem, Sect. II, p. 197.

8 idem, Sect VI, p. 252.
a strong propensity to consider objects strongly in that view, under which they appear to me . . .
Without this quality, by which the mind enlivens some ideas beyond others (which seemingly is so trivial, and so little founded on reason) we could never assent to any argument, nor carry our view beyond those few objects, which are present to our senses. 

He takes this phenomenon, the vivacity of ideas, as the starting point, the root, of memory, senses, and understanding.

If we assume that the ordinary middle-sized objects of everyday life exist through time, independent of perception, then our questions about them become epistemological, for example, 'how do we come to know of them?', and 'how is it that we recognize one of them as the same object that we saw yesterday?' But Hume did not make this assumption. His problem, as I see it, was how to derive what we ordinarily take for granted (namely, independently existing objects) from phenomenal experience. That is, he could not just assume the distinction between my perception and what I perceive, since how we come to the subject-object duality is exactly what is at issue. To make that move is to beg the very central question that concerned him.

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9 *Treatise*, Bk I, Part IV, Sect VII, p. 265.

10 *ibid.*

11 *ibid.*

1.1.1. Two Conflicting Languages

The problem originates in the way that a particular use of ‘individual’ interferes with Hume’s use of ‘perceive’. Here are some examples of this use, I will call it the etymological use of ‘individual’.13

Thomas Spenser, 1628: *The art of logick*. It is not possible to know until we come unto individuals . . . until we attain unto those things which doe not admit division.14

Edward Phillips, 1658: *The new world of English words: or, a general dictionary*. An individual . . . in Logick . . . signifies that which cannot be divided into more of the same name or nature.15

Consider also an entry under ‘individuate’, and an example of the use of ‘individuation’, from the same period:

separate and continuous existence as a single indivisible object16

Henry More, 1660: *An explanation of the grand mystery of godliness*. vi. iv. 223. It being most certain there is no stable Personality of a man but what is in his Soul, (for if the Body be Essential to this numerical Identity, a grown man has not the same individuation he had when he was Christened.)17

‘Individual’ is derived from the mediaeval Latin *individualis* meaning indivisible, or inseparable. (Use of ‘individual’ was rare before the seventeenth century,18 the earliest instances noted being in the fifteenth.) ‘Individual’ is also the usual translation of ‘ατομόσ’ in Aristotle.

13 I owe the distinction between the etymological use and the separative use of ‘individual’ to R.E. Jennings.


15 *ibid.*

16 *idem*, s.v. ‘individuate’.

17 *idem*, s.v. ‘individual’.

I use the *O.E.D.* as a source because, arguably, it traces use that is more likely to be commonly shared use than those we might find in the works of specialists, such as philosophers. Hume's treatment of *identity* can be seen as a criticism of a presupposition of the etymological use, that is, he questions the notion of an indivisible (into more objects of the same name or nature), unchanging *individual* constituting the identity of natural objects. Some of his arguments consider how 'identity' is commonly used. The entries from the *O.E.D.* illustrate that this notion of *individual* entered the language prior to Hume's day. Thus, his criticism was not directed at any straw man, but at a notion that had considerable currency. The notion of an enduring individual was bound to the notions of indivisibility and invariability. By contrast, our current notion stresses the sense of something separated from its background.

That Hume is targeting this notion of individual will become evident during the course of this essay. I begin here with a preliminary sketch of the target, his method of deconstruction, and his response to one attempt at a rejoinder. His use of language indicates that two notions were, in his view, being treated as equivalent: what he calls the *principium individuationis*, the principle of individuation, and the principle of identity.19 In other words, his target is the bond between the notions of indivisibility and invariability and that of an enduring individual.

There is textual warrant for this claim. First, he questions the connection between indivisibility and enduring identity in his arguments from perception. Secondly, he repeatedly pits the language of perception against the use of the notions of invariability and uninterruptedness in connection with what we might call identity through time. Here is one way in which Hume describes the target.

> 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*.20

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20 *idem*, Sect. VI, p. 253.
Thirdly, he questions taking the qualities of invariableness and uninterruptedness as representing necessary conditions of the idea of identity through time.

The constancy of our perceptions makes us ascribe to them a perfect numerical identity, tho’... they have only one of the essential qualities of identity, namely, invariableness.\(^{21}\)

I claim, then, that, in his deconstruction of ‘identity’, Hume is analysing the etymological sense of ‘individual’, which binds together the notions of indivisibility and invariability with that of an enduring object.

It is the way that the etymological notion of individual functions in the concept of continuing identity that results in incompatibilities between the use of ‘identity’ and Hume’s use of ‘perceive’. Consider, on one hand, sentences of the general form represented by “I perceive the billiard ball”. This form is compatible with the etymological use of ‘individual’. There is a simple, direct, subject-object relationship between ‘I’ and ‘billiard ball’, which is consistent with the idea of two indivisible, invariable objects (that is, with the etymological notion of individual). This way of talking is also consistent with what Hume calls the “vulgar”\(^{22}\) trust of the senses that, in the end, he wants to uphold.\(^{23}\) Hume’s use of ‘perceive’ (namely, its nominalizing transformation—which I take up next) invokes some distinctions, which the way of talking represented in the last-quoted sentence does not exhibit.

Consider, on the other hand, the results of using the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’, namely ‘perception’, together with the use of some neutral verb, such as ‘have’ or ‘receive’. The originally quoted sentence becomes something like, for example, “I have (or receive) a perception of a billiard ball.” ‘Perception’ is derived from the Latin percepere, to take

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\(^{22}\) idem, p. 209.

\(^{23}\) “I begun this subject with premising, that we ought to have an implicit faith in our senses, and that this wou’d be the conclusion, I shou’d draw from the whole of my reasoning.” idem, p. 217.
or receive (as in the *perception* of rents\(^{24}\)) The nominalizing transformation complicates the initial duality, by introducing a third component, ‘perception’. This restatement seems to hypostatize the act of perceiving. ‘Perception’, the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’, used with a neutral verb (for example, ‘have’), conveys the idea that the perceiver, the subject, receives something from the object, namely, *perceptions*.

The result is that what was was treated as ontologically independent, namely the billiard ball, what was the object of the verb, looks no longer to be ontologically independent. Its place is taken over in the sentence, and in ontology, by *perception*. Another result of this use of language is that what was treated as a transparent medium, for example, vision, suddenly takes on the character of an opaque barrier between the perceiver and the object. Instead of a simple dualism, there is now a tripartite division consisting of subject, direct object (namely, ‘perception’), and what we might call a mediated object. This move undermines the indivisibility and the invariability of both subject and object, as we will see in the course of this essay.

The initially stable duality between subject and object now threatens to collapse into idealism, or, worse yet, solipsism. We might block this result by making a new distinction, between perceptions and the objects causing them. We might suppose the former

\[
\text{to be interrupted, and perishing, and different at every return; the latter to be uninterrupted, and to preserve a continu’d existence and identity.}^{25}
\]

Under this description, we might say, for example, ‘I receive a series of distinct perceptions of the same uninterrupted, continuing object’. Hume rejects this solution as a “palliative remedy”,\(^{26}\) a “monstrous offspring”\(^{27}\) of reason and imagination, one that tries, unsuccessfully,

\(^{24}\) *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. ‘perception’.

\(^{25}\) *Treatise*, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 211.

\(^{26}\) *ibid.*
to accommodate what reason tells us about perceptions (that they are interrupted and distinct)\textsuperscript{28} with what imagination tells us (that our resembling perceptions have a continued and uninterrupted existence, and are not annihilated by their absence).\textsuperscript{29} He argues that this solution is liable to the same difficulties [as the vulgar system]; and is over-and-above loaded with this absurdity, that it at once denies and establishes the vulgar supposition. Philosophers deny our resembling perceptions to be identically the same, and uninterrupted; and yet have so great a propensity to believe them such, that they arbitrarily invent a new set of perceptions, to which they attribute these qualities. I say, a new set of perceptions: For we may well suppose in general, but 'tis impossible for us distinctly to conceive, objects to be in their nature any thing but exactly the same with perceptions. What then can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falsehood?\textsuperscript{30}

But, according to Hume, our ideas of objects are ideas of some perceptual notion or other.

But to form the idea of an object, and to form an idea simple is the same thing \ldots Now as 'tis impossible to form an idea of an object, that is possest of quantity and quality, and yet is possest of no precise degree of either; it follows, that there is an equal impossibility of forming an idea, that is not limited and confin'd in both these particulars.\textsuperscript{31}

Holding that continuing objects exist is tantamount to holding that perceptions continue to exist, since, on Hume's view, we cannot form an idea of something as an object without resorting to a notion of some particular perception. For example, for something to count as an object, it must be distinguishable in some manner, say by colour, size, location, etc. Therefore, to Hume, to try to solve the problem by drawing a distinction between perceptions and the

\textsuperscript{27} \textit{Treatise}, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 215.

\textsuperscript{28} \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{29} \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{30} \textit{idem}, p. 218.

\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Treatise}, Bk I, Part I, Sect. VII, p. 20, emphasis added.
objects causing them just reproduces the problem it was intended to explain; what was one set of perceptions becomes two, the second set minimal, abstracted from the first, a shadow—trying to be unvarying and uninterrupted, yet lacking any specific perceptual content.

1.1.2. A Humean Language Game

My argument in this chapter concerns what I take to be the net effect of Hume’s use of the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’: the deconstruction of the etymological notion of individual, as it pertains to both sides of the original subject-object duality illustrated in the previous section. In Chapter Two, I will argue that we may use Hume’s doctrines to reconstruct a notion of individual that is more compatible with his use of ‘perceive’ and with the current use of ‘individual’.

Current use of ‘individual’, what I will henceforth call the separative use, differs from the etymological use. It stresses a different thread of meaning, the idea of something differentiated and contained, separated from its surroundings. Current senses are illustrated by the O.E.D.’s definitions:

Intended to serve one person; designed to contain one portion;

Relating to or pertaining to the study of individuals, as opposed to that of a group or society.

Examples illustrate that the recent, separative use of ‘individual’, ‘individuation’, and ‘individuate’ has distinguishable differences from the etymological use:

1923 H.G. Baynes tr. Jung’s Psychol. Types xi. 561: Individuation, therefore, is a process of differentiation, having for its goal the development of the individual personality.


33 ibid.

34 A Supplement to the Oxford English Dictionary, (Oxford University Press, 1976), s.v. ‘individual’.
Consider also another example, which represents the change in the use of ‘individuation’ as well as that of ‘individual’:

1897 W.G. Smith tr. *Tubef's Dis. Plants* viii. 87 This unification of two living beings into an individual whole, I have designated ‘Individuation’.

Hume begins his deconstruction by taking the language of perception as his standard, that is, he treats perceptions as facts.

The only existences, of which we are certain, are perceptions, . . . [they] are the first foundations of all our conclusions.

Although Hume treats simple, as opposed to complex, perceptions as the modular components of experience, (They are the “first foundations of all our conclusions”), that is, as ontological, it is only in some sense that he does so. For this reason I refer to his doctrine of minimal perceptions as Hume’s quasi-ontology. It is an ingredient in the arguments he uses to free the notion of individual (the idea of self as subject as well as the idea of the object) from the idea of an unchangeable, indivisible, unity.

To begin I will argue that, when Hume argues to the notions of simple ideas and simple impressions, he need not be taken to be referring to some ontologically atomic components, but instead may be treated as saying that perception has what we may describe as minima. In other words, he may be taken to be claiming that there is a lower bound to the discriminations we can

35 ibid.
36 ibid.
38 *idem*, p. 212.
make at any particular moment in perceptual experience. He derives some of his arguments in
the relevant sections of the *Treatise* from other writers\(^{39}\) and in those passages he may appear to
be making strong ontological claims about the modularity of experience. However, other
passages indicate that he is agnostic about ultimate answers to this question, and is merely
adopting a pragmatic hypothesis, one that looks as though it will work.

This treatment becomes plausible when we consider his advice that we should not take the
*minima* of perception as an ontological limit to the object. Consider a passage in which he
describes his notion of a *minimum*:

"'Tis therefore certain, that the imagination reaches a *minimum*, and may raise up to itself an idea,
of which it cannot conceive any sub-division, and which cannot be diminished without a total
annihilation. When you tell me of the thousandth and ten thousandth part of a grain of sand, I
have a distinct idea of these numbers and of their different proportions; but the images, which I
form in my mind to represent the things themselves, are nothing different from each other, nor
inferior to that image, by which I represent the grain of sand itself, which is suppos'd so vastly to
exceed them. . . . 'Tis the same case with the impressions of the senses as with the ideas of the
imagination. Put a spot of ink upon paper, fix your eye upon that spot, and retire to such a
distance, that at last you lose sight of it; 'tis plain, that the moment before it vanish'd the image
or impression was perfectly indivisible. 'Tis not for want of rays of light striking on our eyes,
that the minute parts of distant bodies convey not any sensible impression; but because they are
remov'd beyond that distance, at which their impressions were reduc'd to a *minimum*, and were
incapable of any farther diminution.\(^{40}\)

Although particular ideas and perceptions have minimal limits, Hume argues that we should
not take these limits as limits upon the ability of the imagination to form "an adequate idea of
what goes beyond a certain degree of minuteness as well as of greatness."\(^{41}\) We can avoid this
conclusion by refusing to take the "impressions of those minute objects, which appear to the

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\(^{40}\) *Treatise*, Book I, Part I, Sect II, p. 27.

\(^{41}\) *idem*, p. 28.
senses, to be equal or nearly equal to the objects⁴². That is, we should not take the limitations of our ability to make discriminations as an ontological limit on an object we are investigating.

Instead, we should conclude, that the difficulty lies in enlarging our conceptions so much as to form a just notion of a mite, or even of an insect a thousand times less than a mite. For in order to form a just notion of these animals, we must have a distinct idea representing every part of them.⁴³

The limitation on our ability to make discriminations in any particular perceptual situation should not be taken as a limitation on the object, for, in another perceptual situation—using, for example, different instruments—we may make finer discriminations, which may count as images of the same object.

The only defect of our senses is, that they give us disproportion’d images of things, and represent as minute and uncompounded what is really great and compos’d of a vast number of parts.⁴⁴

We want a distinct idea of every part of the objects we are studying. Hume argues that if they are conceived to be infinitely divisible, we can never have a distinct idea of every part, since we cannot traverse an infinity and reach the end of the inventory. Thus, this alternative, according to Hume’s thinking, makes theorizing impossible. Therefore, his preferred alternative was to take the extremely difficult, but at least not impossible, route, that of hypothesizing indivisible parts or atoms. The task

according to the system of infinite divisibility, is utterly impossible, and according to that of indivisible parts or atoms, is extremely difficult, by reason of the vast number and multiplicity of these parts.⁴⁵

⁴² ibid.
⁴³ ibid.
⁴⁵ ibid.
Difficult though it may be, this move makes it possible to

discover the error of the common opinion, that the capacity of the mind is limited on both sides,
and that 'tis impossible for the imagination to form an adequate idea, of what goes beyond a
certain degree of minuteness as well as of greatness.⁴⁶

1.1.3. Humean Atomism—An Inventory of Hume's Quasi-ontology

This section catalogues the items in Hume's quasi-ontology. Recall that Hume has adopted
the hypothesis that experience is analysable into minima. Hume makes an empirical
generalization: that all of our ideas, complex or simple, ultimately derive from some impression,
that is, from some sensation, passion, or emotion. He begins with the premise that nothing is
ever really present to the mind but its own perceptions,⁴⁷ and divides perceptions into two
distinct kinds, impressions and ideas. Lively and forceful perceptions, such as those of the
sensations and passions, he calls 'impressions'; ideas are images of impressions, manipulated in
thinking and reasoning.⁴⁸ Ideas, in turn, fall into two categories, simple and complex. Complex
ideas arise "from some principle of union among our simple ideas."⁴⁹ Simple ideas, in their turn,
derive from simple impressions.

All our simple ideas in their first appearance are deriv'd from simple impressions, which are
correspondent to them, and which they exactly represent.⁵⁰

Recall Hume's argument that there is a limit to the mind's capacity to divide ideas and
impressions. I interpret this as the claim that, in any particular perceptual situation, there is a

⁴⁶ ibid.

⁴⁷ Treatise, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 197.


⁵⁰ idem, Part I, Sect I, p. 4.
limit to the kinds of discriminations that we can make among our ideas as well as among impressions; that is, we cannot make an infinite number of distinctions:

the idea, which we form of any finite quality, is not infinitely divisible . . . In rejecting the infinite capacity of the mind, we suppose it may arrive at an end in the division of its ideas; nor are there any possible means of evading the evidence of this conclusion.51

There is a limit to discriminations, a minimally registerable point, so to speak, in any particular perceptual situation, which is dependent, for example, upon the kind of instrument used to make the discriminations. Recall, from the previous section, Hume’s example of the spot of ink. As you move further and further away, the spot takes up a smaller and smaller part of your visual field, until the moment that it vanishes. However, the moment before it vanished the image was perfectly indivisible.52 At that moment the impression was “reduc’d to a minimum, and [was] incapable of any farther diminution.”53 This is not to say, of course, that we could not use a pair of binoculars to spread the light rays sufficiently to allow us to see the dot quite clearly from the same distance that, a moment before—in a different perceptual situation—we were unable to distinguish it. The point is that in a given perceptual situation,—regardless of what instrument we use, natural or artificial—there is some lower limit upon our ability to discriminate, some minimally registerable perception, which is dependent upon that very instrument.

So far we have in our inventory minima, namely, a lower limit to the divisibility of ideas and to the registration of impressions. Our ideas include those of space and time. Hume argues that there must also be a limit to the divisibility of the notions of time and of space. He derives that limit from what he claims is a limit on the idea of extension. There is a

51 idem, Part II, Sect II, p. 27.
52 ibid.
53 ibid.
least idea I can form of a part of extension, and being certain that there is nothing more minute than this idea, I conclude, that whatever I discover by its means must be a real quantity of extension.54

It is again important to note here that Hume is not making any claims about objects as we ordinarily think of them, but about impressions. When he says that our ideas "are adequate representations of the most minute parts of extension"55 he is not claiming that they are adequate representations of ontologically existing objects, but of the smallest impression of extension we can register in any given perceptual situation. In any perceptual situation, that is, at any moment in which we are perceiving, the character of our perception at that moment is, in part, dependent upon the instruments we are using. For example, at one moment I may observe the bark of a tree with unaided vision. That counts as a perceptual situation. At another moment, I may use a high-powered microscope to examine the same area of the tree. This counts as another perceptual situation. In each perceptual situation there is a limit to the discriminations I will be able to make, although in each situation the limit is different. In that sense, if our ideas are images or replicas56 of impressions, then what we discover by means of the ideas, since the ideas were derived from impressions, must be true of the impressions of which the ideas are images.

According to Hume's description, the experience of an extended object, such as a table, is that of impressions of coloured points, disposed in a certain manner.57 He argues that we notice a resemblance, with respect to the disposition of the coloured points, in our experience of other extended objects. Then, we abstract away from the particulars of colour, shape, size, etc. to the

54 *idem*, p. 29.


56 "... every simple idea has a simple impression, which resembles it; and every simple impression a correspondent idea." *idem*, Part I, Sect I, p. 3.

57 *idem*, Part II, Sect III, p. 34.
idea of merely the disposition of points. This idea is what we call space. The idea of space, then, is the idea of a certain way in which points are disposed in experience, which is abstracted from experience, from impressions of what we call an extended object, that is, from a certain disposition of coloured points.

Hume argues, similarly, that time is an abstraction away from the particulars of all experience—described as successions of perceptions. From our experience of the succession of ideas and impressions, we form the idea of time. He supports his claim with the premise that wherever we have no successive perceptions, we have no notion of time.

Someone deeply engrossed in one idea loses the sense of time passing. From this Hume concludes that the idea of time requires change.

Time cannot make its appearance to the mind, either alone, or attended with a steady unchangeable object, but is always discover'd by some perceivable succession of changeable objects.

Hume claims that the idea of time is never conceived in isolation from a "perceivable succession of changeable objects". Furthermore, he argues that the idea of time is not derived from a distinguishable impression, but is inseparable from the manner in which impressions appear, that is, as successions.

The idea of time is not deriv'd from a particular impression mixed up with others, and plainly distinguishable from them; but arises altogether from the manner, in which impressions appear to the mind, without making one of the number. Five notes play'd on a flute give us the impression

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58 ibid.
59 Treatise, Book I, Part II, Sect III, p. 35.
60 ibid.
61 ibid.
62 ibid.
and idea of time; tho’ time be not a sixth impression, which presents itself to the hearing or any other of the senses.63

It follows from Hume’s reasoning that, without a distinguishable series, there can be no idea of time. Since something unchanging (uninterrupted and unvarying) cannot be a series, such an object cannot, by itself, be conceived as persisting through time.

The ideas of some objects it certainly must have, nor is it possible for it without these ideas ever to arrive at any conception of time; which since it appears not as any primary distinct impression, can plainly be nothing but different ideas, or impressions, or objects dispos’d in a certain manner, that is, succeeding each other.64

This doctrine has significant implications for his account of identity, as we shall see. In answer to those

who pretend, that the idea of duration is applicable in a proper sense to objects, which are perfectly unchangeable, [he directs them to] reflect on the foregoing conclusion, that the idea of duration is always deriv’d from a succession of changeable objects, and can never be convey’d to the mind by any thing stedfast and unchangeable. For it inevitably follows from thence, that since the idea of duration cannot be deriv’d from such an object, it can never in any propriety or exactness be apply’d to it, nor can any thing unchangeable be ever said to have duration.65

The final, emphasized remark in this passage follows from Hume’s doctrine that time requires change. We can take the complex idea of extension and separate from it one of the simple ideas of which it is constituted.66 We cannot say of it that it has extension, because then it would have parts. We cannot say of it that it has duration, because then, again, it would have

63 *idem*, p. 36.
64 *idem*, p. 37.
65 *ibid*. emphasis added.
(temporal) parts.\textsuperscript{67} We cannot say of it that it is nothing, for then extension, which we want to say is real, would consist of nothing,\textsuperscript{68} and, as \textit{King Lear} warned, ‘nothing can come of nothing’.

The idea of space is derived only from two senses, sight and touch. Only impressions of colour derive from sight and only impressions of solidity derive from touch. If a point (minimally registerable impression) is not coloured or tangible, it cannot cause an idea to sight or touch respectively, and, therefore, the idea of extension could not exist, since it is an abstraction from particular instances of a certain disposition of those points. But the idea of extension does exist, so its parts must also—and must be taken as coloured or tangible.\textsuperscript{69}

Here therefore I must ask, What is our idea of a simple and indivisible point? . . . The idea of space is convey’d to the mind by two senses, the sight and touch . . . That compound impression, which represents extension, consists of several lesser impressions, that are indivisible to the eye or feeling, and may be call’d impressions of atoms or corpuscles endow’d with colour and solidity. . . . There is nothing but the idea of their colour or tangibility which can render them conceivable by the mind. Upon the removal of the ideas of these sensible qualities, they are utterly annihilated to the thought or imagination.\textsuperscript{70}

By parity of reasoning, the \textit{minima} of time cannot be conceived without conceiving of something perceptible, as it were, \textit{filling} them, such as \textit{shape, colour}, etc. Unless they appear in a certain manner, namely, as a succession, they could not cause the idea of a succession, that is, a duration must consist in a succession of (at least minimally registerable) perceptions or else duration would not be conceivable.\textsuperscript{71} We shall see that the implication to minimally registerable

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{67} \textit{ibid.}.
\item \textsuperscript{68} \textit{ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{69} \textit{idem}, p. 39.
\item \textsuperscript{70} \textit{Treatise}, Book I, Part II, Sect III, p. 38-39.
\item \textsuperscript{71} \textit{idem}, p. 39.
\end{itemize}
space-time points is significant for Hume’s doctrine of identity as derived from the constancy of perception.

**Summary**

This completes our inventory of Hume’s quasi-ontology. There is, according to Hume, a lower limit to the mind’s ability to discriminate among both impressions and ideas. The notion of minima, both of impressions and ideas, applies to ideas that are directly derived from impressions, as images, as well as to ideas that are abstracted from impressions. Thus, not only is our experience of objects divisible into the miminal or atomic perceptions of which they are constituted, our experience of time and space are also divisible into minimal components. Furthermore, the minima of space as well as of time must be conceived as being, as it were, filled with perceptions of non-abstract qualities.

We now turn to Hume’s account of the genesis of the notion of identity, which, I will argue, grounds the idea that the relationship that we attribute to temporal stages of what we ordinarily take as one object is not determined by observation.

**1.2.1. ‘Identity’ as a Product of Grammar**

I will, in part, be treating Hume’s criticism of identity as the use of a philosophical method. He uses a portion of language, namely, the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’, as a tool. I will argue that he uses that tool to dismantle the etymological notion of individual through his critique of the notion of identity.

Hume claims that the idea of identity arises from two principles, one positive and one negative. The positive principle is what he calls the *constancy* 72 of perception.

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.\textsuperscript{73}

It may appear that, in this passage, Hume is assuming the existence of objects and drawing a distinction between them and impressions. He is not. He is in the process of attempting to discover

those peculiar qualities in our impressions, which makes us attribute to them a distinct and continued existence.\textsuperscript{74}

So, he uses ‘object’ as a kind of shorthand for the sets of perceptions that have the peculiar qualities which he is attempting to describe. This use of ‘object’ occurs frequently in the \textit{Treatise}, and increases the difficulty of interpretation; however, if we bear in mind that Hume is not assuming the existence of objects, but trying to explain how we arrive at the idea of the independent existence of objects, the difficulty is somewhat mitigated.

The most important of the qualities that tempt us to attribute continued existence is resemblance:

These mountains, and houses, and trees, which lie at present under my eye, have always appear’d to me in the same order; and when I lose sight of them by shutting my eyes or turning my head, I soon after find them return upon me without the least alteration. My bed and table, my books and papers, present themselves in the same uniform manner, and change not upon account of any interruption in my seeing or perceiving them.\textsuperscript{75}

Once again, Hume is using object-words, such as ‘mountains’, ‘houses’, ‘trees’, ‘bed’, ‘table’, etc., as shorthand for

\textsuperscript{73} \textit{ibid.}.
\textsuperscript{74} \textit{ibid.}
\textsuperscript{75} \textit{Treatise}, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 195.
all the impressions, whose objects are suppos'd to have an external existence.\textsuperscript{76}

This reflects a constraint of his language, and, although it is the source of considerable difficulty and frustration in interpretation, we must forgive Hume the trouble it causes us, in view of the fact that he is struggling to forge a new language of identity, one that will be compatible with his use of the nominalizing transformation of 'perceive'.

The close resemblance among distinguishable perceptions—their constancy—leads us to take a succession of related appearances as individually the same.\textsuperscript{77}

We find by experience, that there is such a constancy in almost all the impressions of the senses, that their interruption produces no alteration in them, and hinders them not from returning the same in appearance and in situation as at their first existence. I survey the furniture of my chamber; I shut my eyes, and afterwards open them; and find the new perceptions to resemble perfectly those, which formerly struck my senses.\textsuperscript{78}

\textit{Resemblance} is a strong relation, one that connects together our ideas of interrupted perceptions,\textsuperscript{79} of the furniture in our homes, of mountains, of trees, and so on. It is also the basis of the coherence of experience, binding together perceptions that have a certain "regularity in their appearances".\textsuperscript{80} \textit{Resemblance} "conveys the mind with an easy transition from one to another."\textsuperscript{81} The constancy of perception, e.g. the resemblance between his initial perception of

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{76} \textit{ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{77} \textit{idem}, p. 199.
\item \textsuperscript{78} \textit{Treatise}, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 204.
\item \textsuperscript{79} \textit{ibid.}
\item \textsuperscript{80} \textit{Treatise}, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 195.
\item \textsuperscript{81} \textit{idem}, p. 204.
\end{itemize}
the furniture in his room and the one that occurs immediately upon re-opening his eyes, and the coherency of perception,\textsuperscript{82} connects ideas together, and carries the mind from one to the other.

The strength of this relation overrules making further discriminations, with the result that one perception is mistaken for the other;\textsuperscript{83} that is, we fail to discriminate between them and the two are taken to be numerically identical. In Hume's language, a resemblance among perceptions leads us to attribute (numerical) identity to them.\textsuperscript{84} However, the interruption in their appearance leads us to distinguish one from another.\textsuperscript{85} Hume diagnoses this conflict between attributing and denying numerical identity as a "contradiction".\textsuperscript{86}

This contradiction between, on the one hand, taking two perceptions as numerically identical and, on the other hand, recognizing that they are numerically distinguishable, is the major symptom and lies at the root of the conflict between the etymological use of 'individual' and the nominalizing transformation of 'perceive'. This conflict between two ways of talking produces incompatible sentences. In them the same object is characterized as having mutually exclusive properties: numerical identity and diversity.

Interruption in perception contradicts one of the essential conditions of numerical identity namely, uninterruptedness. Thus, the idea that continuing objects are numerically identical through time is in conflict with the fact that perception of what we treat as identical objects is inevitably interrupted, by, for example, blinking, eye movement, change in position, sleep, etc. The interruption in perception contradicts one of the conditions presupposed by the etymological notion of individual, one of what were taken to be the essential conditions of

\textsuperscript{82} "a like alteration produc'd in a like time, whether I am present or absent, near or remote", \textit{idem}, p. 195.

\textsuperscript{83} \textit{idem}, p. 204.

\textsuperscript{84} \textit{idem}, p. 205.

\textsuperscript{85} \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{86} \textit{ibid}.
numerical identity, namely, uninterruptedness. Here Hume is questioning the idea that the identity of an object is constituted by something indivisible. This idea is one aspect of the notion of identity that takes an enduring individual to be constituted by something that survives change.

Hume is intensely critical\(^{87}\) of one particular philosophical response to this problem: the "propension to unite these broken appearances by the fiction of a continu’d existence."\(^{88}\) An entire section will be devoted to a discussion of this particular fiction, one of many that Hume discusses; hereafter I will call it the fiction of homogeneity. My concern here is to argue that the derivation of the notion of identity from resemblance grounds the idea that ‘identity’ belongs to a portion of language that is not observational.

We have already seen Hume’s argument to a conclusion that I take to be uncontroversial, that nothing unvarying and uninterrupted can be found in our experience of natural objects, that is, our experience of natural objects fails to meet the criteria deemed essential for counting as numerically identical. Thus, the numerical identity through time of natural objects is not observational.

But, the identity through time that we attribute to natural objects is, according to Hume’s argument, the result of resemblances among perceptions, and we, arguably, do observe resemblances. Someone might argue that, on this basis, we should conclude that identity through time is observational. However, Hume’s negative principle of identity blocks this move, as I will argue in the next section.

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\(^{87}\) "What can we look for from this confusion of groundless and extraordinary opinions but error and falsehood? And how can we justify to ourselves any belief we repose in them?" Treatise, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 218.

\(^{88}\) idem, p. 205, emphasis added.
1.2.2. The Attribution of *Identity* is Defeasible

Recall my suggestion that Hume distinguishes two principles which ground our idea of identity, one positive and one negative. So far, I have discussed the positive principle, *resemblance*, a quality which also leads us to attribute identity. The role of the negative principle is equally important, and is one to which we should pay close attention, since, in spite of its significance, it ordinarily goes largely unnoticed.

The positive resemblance among perceptions leads to an association of their ideas\textsuperscript{89} that is, leads us to take them as the same. There is, on the other hand, always and simultaneously with resemblances, another aspect of experience to consider: the differences among perceptions. *Resemblance*, in leading us to attribute *identity* simultaneously leads us to overlook or fail to make discriminations among perceptions that otherwise might lead us to attribute *difference*. In other words, according to Hume, the similarities that lead us to attribute continuing identity (identity through time) are always accompanied by differences that might lead us to attribute *difference*.

Hume's negative principle is parasitic upon the positive. The possibility of making further discriminations that would lead us to see differences is always present. These differences ordinarily go unnoticed, but when they are noticed, they lead us to attribute diversity. This empirical claim about perception underlies what I earlier diagnosed as the root of the conflict between the language of 'individual' and that of the nominalizing transformation of 'perceive'. In what follows I will argue that this insight allowed him to free the notion of *individual* from its etymological associations, that it allows a reconstruction of the notion of identity which is consistent with his use of the nominalizing transformation of 'perceive'.

We have what is, arguably, an unmediated or intuitive response to resemblances, one that leads us to *fail to distinguish among resembling ideas*, because they make

\textsuperscript{89} *Treatise*, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 203.
us conceive the one idea by an act or operation of the mind, similar to that by which we conceive
the other . . . and we may establish it for a general rule, that whatever ideas place the mind in the
same disposition or in similar ones, are very apt to be confounded.90

The interpretation of Hume’s argument on this point is made difficult by his implicit
assumption of a premise, which he takes himself to have established, about the nature of
perceptions. We will, therefore, in the course of this discussion, need to recall some points from
my inventory of his quasi-ontology.

I begin with Hume’s argument that the disposition of the mind in “viewing any object which
preserves a perfect identity”91 gets confused with a similar disposition, which occurs when the
mind observes a succession of similar objects.92 To preserve numerical identity, an object must
be unvarying and uninterrupted. The only object that can preserve numerical identity is a
minimal perception, that is, one that has a minimally registered duration. (Recall that nothing
unchangeable and uninterrupted can ever be said to have duration.93)

What may appear to be an uninterrupted observation of an unvarying object through a period
of time is, on Hume’s account, an experience of the constancy of perception, one which is a
paradigmatic illustration of the positive principle of identity (“the ideas of the several distinct
successive qualities of objects are united together by a very close relation”94). Recall that all that
is present to the mind is its own perceptions. By paying careful attention to our experience of
what counts as an unvarying object, say, the pen on our desk, we can notice perceptible
variations from moment to moment, variations that we might ordinarily say are caused by minor
variations in light conditions, changes in the focus of our eyes, etc. It would be extremely

90 Treatise, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 203.
91 ibid.
92 ibid.
93 idem, Part II, Sect III, p. 37, emphasis added.
94 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect III, p. 220.
difficult "by reason of the vast number and multiplicity of these parts" to enumerate the variations of this kind that constitute even what we ordinarily might treat as an uninterrupted experience of an unchanging object.

Thus, the notion of numerical or *perfect* identity must be derived from the idea of *minimal perceptions*. According to Hume's doctrine, that experience is accompanied by a particular disposition of the mind, one that is similar to the disposition that occurs when it experiences a succession of similar perceptions. (Recall that a resemblance among the items in a succession leads to our taking them as the same item.) In a similar way, a resemblance among dispositions leads the mind to fail to distinguish among its own dispositions, and, thus, it mistakes the observation of a closely related succession for the observation of an identity.

The mind readily passes from one to the other, and perceives not the change without a strict attention, of which, generally speaking, 'tis wholly incapable.

The point is about human psychology, one that needs some elaboration. To begin, resemblance falls "more properly under the province of intuition than demonstration." That is, resemblances are directly perceived in an unmediated apprehension. Hume's explanation lacks the ability to explain how it is that we can be led to see resemblances that are not immediately recognized. He needs something like a claim that the language of resemblance is

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95 *idem*, Part I, Sect II, p. 28.

96 *idem*, Part IV, Sect. II, p. 201.

97 *idem*, p. 203.

98 *ibid*.

99 *idem*, p. 204.

100 *idem*, p. 203.

an extension of the unmediated apprehension of resemblance, an extension that allows us to come to see something as of a certain kind.

His premise is, nonetheless, fundamentally correct, since, although one may be led to recognize resemblances that one does not immediately see, there is no guarantee that such recognition will occur. In other words, in the end we cannot prove that a resemblance exists by demonstration, in the way that we might, say, in our ordinary way of talking, prove that there is a container of ice-cream in the refrigerator by opening the door to the freezer and showing it to someone who claimed there was none. (This example does not presuppose an ontology of independently existing objects. It does presuppose some consensus on what counts as a freezer and as a container of ice cream, which I take to be easier to achieve than a consensus on some other kinds of resemblances.)

Secondly, the constancy of perception produces what, perhaps, we might think of as an instinctive, or at least unreasoned, response: that of associating similar perceptions and mental dispositions, that is, ascribing identity through time to them.

We can attribute a distinct continu’d existence to objects without ever consulting REASON, or weighing our opinions by any philosophical principles . . . This sentiment, then, as it is entirely unreasonable, must proceed from some other faculty than the understanding.

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102 “those peculiar qualities in our impressions, which makes us attribute to them a distinct and continued existence”. I am applying Hume’s shorthand for the sets of perceptions that have the peculiar qualities.

103 “We were having the Eiche’s usual “dish of the day”, Schweinebraten mit Knöll [roast pork with dumplings], when Rainer suddenly stopped eating and nudged me. “Look at him”, he said: “he looks like James Dean.” I glanced up. He was pointing to the fellow washing the beer mugs. He was a typical Bavarian country boy who was no longer a boy but around thirty. He was okay but I couldn’t see any resemblance to the mythical dream man and said so. But Rainer insisted and he sent me to find out who the pretty-boy was.” Robert Katz and Peter Berling, Love is Colder Than Death: The Life and Times of Rainer Werner Fassbinder, (Toronto: Collins Publishing Co., 1989), p. 84.

Hume’s point is that at least some identity attributions are not arrived at through reasoning. Taking, say, one’s cup as the same item from one sip of coffee to the next is not a reasoned response but one that is characterized by absence of doubt.

Thirdly, and more importantly for this aspect of the argument, resemblance, as we recall, causes an association of dispositions. The association is accompanied by a tendency for

the faculties of the mind [to] repose themselves in a manner, and take no more exercise, than what is necessary to continue the idea, of which we were formerly posset, and which subsists without variation or interruption.

The result of the association of dispositions is that we fail to notice differences, and, beyond a certain point of course, are also incapable of noticing them. Differences among perceptions are relegated to the background in favour of similarities, with the result that we are disposed to take experience as more homogeneous than, in fact, it is:

... as the mind is once in the train of observing an uniformity among objects, it naturally continues, till it renders the uniformity as compleat as possible.

When the mind observes a uniformity among objects, that is, when perceptions have constancy, according to Hume’s positive and negative principles it is disposed to mistake one perception for another and one disposition of the mind for another that is similar. In other words, once the mind observes a uniformity, it tends to normalize or regularize perception until the uniformity is as complete as possible.

It is interesting to note that Hume’s notion of how resemblance functions is entirely consistent with the New Rhetoric notion of presence.

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105 idem, p. 203.
106 ibid.
107 ibid.
Through presence, writers place “certain elements” in their discourses, those on which they “[wish] to center attention”, in “the foreground of the [reader’s] consciousness”. Initially, therefore, presence is “a psychological phenomenon”; that on which the mind and senses dwell “is, by that very circumstance, overestimated”.

This reading of presence is consistent with Gestalt principles. According to these, sensations organize themselves into wholes, or gestalten, certain combinations of which seem automatically to be foregrounded; these combinations we see as having shape and substance, outlined against a shapeless and relatively insubstantial background. Gestalten are clearly manifested to sight and hearing, less clearly to the other senses. Attributively, they can refer not only to things experienced, but also to collections of thoughts and ideas. On this reading, presence becomes a special case of perception.109

The foregrounding110 of resemblances and the consequent relegating to the background of differences is an important tool in the rhetoric of science, according to Alan Gross.111 I am not claiming here that Hume’s positive and negative principles of identity are Gestalt or quasi-Gestalt notions, but that the role of very similar notions in Gestalt psychology and the New Rhetoric suggests that the principles he distinguished do indeed play a central role in human psychology.

Identity through time relies upon both a positive and a negative principle. It follows from this that any cases that we ordinarily describe as identity over time may be also be described as diversity, given technological or other means of distinguishing differences. The resemblances among perceptions of what we take to be the same object as it exists through time are always accompanied by differences. Differences may increase in number in a sufficiently gradual way


110 Chris Baldick, The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), s.v. ‘foregrounding’: “giving unusual prominence to one element or property of a text, relative to other less noticeable aspects. According to the theories of Russian Formalism, literary works are special by virtue of the fact that they foreground their own linguistic status, thus drawing attention to how they say something rather than to what they say.”

so as to be unnoticed as they arise. However, those initially unnoticed differences may gradually increase over time while resemblances concomitantly diminish, so that, when an initial stage of what we might ordinarily treat as one object is compared to a much later stage, the difference appears radical. In fact, the very same changes that might go unnoticed on one description seem to destroy the identity of an object\textsuperscript{112} on another.

There are examples in the literature that illustrate this point.\textsuperscript{113} Marjorie Price tells a story about a canine astronaut who returns from a trip to Mars and undergoes a non-dog-like transformation.

Film cameras record every moment of his existence. During this time, Rover undergoes a gradual change, so that by the end of the isolation period he is an amorphous mass of cells. Even the chromosomal constitution of his cells has changed: its nature is not identifiable as the sort to be found in members of any known organism.\textsuperscript{114}

Price argues that Rover, whom she now, significantly, re-names ‘Clover’, has been preserved in the transformation. However, Price’s intuitions differ from Norman Swartz’s.

... for my own reaction is that this entity—whatever it is—is *not* Rover: Rover has at some point in the six-month interval ceased to exist and has been replaced (sorrowfully) by this amorphous mass.\textsuperscript{115}

On Swartz’s intuition *Rover* has not survived.

The disagreement between Price and Swartz has a handy Humean explanation. First, recall Hume’s point that *resemblance* is not demonstrable. Next consider Price’s intuitive response to her own example. In Humean terms, we might say that, for Price

\begin{footnotes}
\item[112] *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect III, p. 220.
\item[115] Swartz, *Beyond Experience*, fn. p. 345.
\end{footnotes}
the ideas of the several distinct successive qualities of objects are united together by a very close relation [the uninterrupted observation of the video camera]; the mind, in looking along the succession must be carry'd from one part of it to another by an easy transition, and will no more perceive the change, than if it contemplated the same unchangeable object... hence... any such succession of related qualities is readily consider'd as one continu'd object.\textsuperscript{116}

Hume might argue, on the one hand, that Price, following a resemblance that she perceives, ascribes an identity to the changeable succession of connected qualities.\textsuperscript{117} That is, there were distinguishable differences among the items constituting the succession of perceptions of Rover, but Price was paying attention to a resemblance:

No one can deny that the entity in the isolation unit at the end of the interval in question, call it 'Clover', is Rover... Yet we cannot justifiably classify Clover as a dog. For the only biologically significant property Clover shares with any dog that ever lived is the property of being composed of cells.\textsuperscript{118}

On the other hand, Hume might argue that Swartz noticed differences that Price overlooked, and, thus, his intuitive response differed from hers. Hume might argue that

instead of traceing it gradually thro' the successive points of time, [Swartz picked out] two distinct periods of its duration, and [compared] the different conditions of the successive qualities; in that case the variations, which were insensible when they arose gradually, ... now appear of consequence, and seem entirely to destroy the identity.\textsuperscript{119}

Hume's implicit claim here is that we tend to attribute identity on the basis of perceived resemblances and to deny it on the basis of perceived differences. This is characteristic of

\textsuperscript{116}Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect III, p. 220.

\textsuperscript{117}ibid. This principle is associated with problems that have come to be known as 'the ship of Theseus'. I discuss this problem and an application of Hume's grammatical solution to it in Chapter Two, Section 2.1.3.

\textsuperscript{118}Price, "Identity through Time", in Journal of Philosophy 74, no. 4 (April 1977), p.203, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{119}Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect III, p. 220.
disputes concerning questions of identity. His response to these kinds of disputes with respect to personal identity is to regard them rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties.120

Since Hume considered his method of explaining personal identity to be the same as his method of reasoning concerning other kinds of natural objects,121 I think it is fair to extend this comment to disputes concerning any kind of natural object. Two hundred years before Wittgenstein, Hume suggested grammatical solutions to some types of philosophical problems. This response is further confirmation that the reading adopted here is correct. This is an important passage in the Treatise, one to which I will return at the end of this section.

If we are talking or writing about resemblances, they become foregrounded, and differences tend to pass unnoticed or even unmentioned.122 Nevertheless, wherever we discriminate resemblances, in our experience of natural objects, we may also discriminate differences. Because resemblances are directly apprehended—or not, as the case may be—what one person might consider a basis for identity, another might not recognize as such. That is, given what we ordinarily treat as the same object, one person might talk about resemblances, while another points out differences.

Since there is nothing identifiable that is entirely unvarying and entirely uninterrupted even in perceptions that bear close resemblances, there is, obviously, no observable basis for the idea that identity is constituted by something unchanging surviving change. The etymological notion of individual, then, is not determined by observation. Hume’s argument undermines the etymological use of ‘individual’, by freeing the notion of an enduring individual (that is, the notion of identity through time) from that of an unchanging, indivisible unity.

120 idem, Conclusions to Part IV, p. 262-263.
121 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 259.
Where resemblances strongly outnumber differences or, perhaps, where they are presented in such a way as to occupy the foreground of our consciousness, we tend to attribute identity. The tendency to attribute identity where we find resemblance is not restricted to the category of single objects.

When we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them.\textsuperscript{123}

Hume’s point about the connection between naming and identity may be extended to the connection between taxonomic naming and taxonomic identity. In individuating species, for example, similarities among individuals are foregrounded, while individual variations are given secondary status. Differences significant enough to allow us to distinguish among individuals, that, in some cases (say in very closely related species) are of a quality and quantity so as to create difficulty in consistently discriminating the purported similarities, are relegated to the background while the resemblances are highlighted, given presence.

Resemblances, as I suggested earlier, may also diminish over time by degrees, in ways that are imperceptible to us, while differences increase. Disputes may arise even in everyday cases over whether to attribute or deny identity. Consider some examples: whether the colour of a swatch of fabric matches (is the same colour as) a sample of paint, or whether it counts as the same colour for one person as another; whether the person in the dock is the same person who robbed the corner store last weekend, whether the person returning after an extended absence is the same person to whom the inheritance was willed,\textsuperscript{124} etc. Because resemblances and differences are ultimately directly apprehended, that is, non-demonstrable, and coeval, and may

\textsuperscript{123} Treatise, Book I, Part I, Sect VII, p. 21.

\textsuperscript{124} Stephen J. Greenblatt, \textit{Learning to Curse: Essays in Early Modern Culture} (New York: Routledge, 1990), the story of Martin Guerre, p. 131-145.
increase or decrease imperceptibly, there is no single standard to which we can appeal to arbitrate all disputes.

Identity depends upon the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity, by means of that easy transition they occasion. But as the relations, and the easiness of the transition may diminish by insensible degrees, we have no just standard, by which we can decide any dispute concerning the time, when they acquire or lose a title to the name of identity. All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union, as we have already observed.  

\[125\] *Treatise*, Bk I, Part IV, Sect. VII, p. 262.
Summary

According to Hume, our attribution of continued identity, what we may call identity through time, is based upon two principles, one positive and one negative. Resemblance, the positive principle, is directly apprehended and not demonstrable, and recognition of resemblance often differs from one person to another. Hume’s negative principle tells us that our ability to make discriminations is limited, there is a point in any perceptual situation beyond which we can make no further discriminations.

Nevertheless, we know from experience that, in what counts as the same situation, given, say, an artificial device for making further discriminations, we could do so. Thus, our memory of past experiences of what we ordinarily treat as continuing objects tells us, and we have the means to say, that in any situation where we find resemblances, we might also find differences in what counts as the same object. That is, there are grounds both for attributing identity as well as for denying it in what count as the same circumstances. Thus, identity through time is not a universally observable quality, but a matter of how we legislate the use of language. Therefore, ‘identity through time’ belongs to a portion of language that is not determined by observation.

1.3.1. Hume’s Use of the Language of Perception Deconstructs the Etymological Use of ‘Individual’

In this section I examine Hume’s approach to the notion of “continu’d and distinct existence”126 as the use of a tool to accomplish a particular task. The tool is the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’. My approach is an extension of some advice derived from Wittgenstein:

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126 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 192.
But a machine surely cannot think!—Is that an empirical statement? No. We only say of a human being and what is like one that it thinks. We also say it of dolls and no doubt of spirits too. Look at the word “to think” as a tool.  

Hume tried to make the objectification of perception consistent with the language of identity. To accomplish this he used the language of perception as the standard and suggested modifications in the language of identity. Of course, Hume did not use this vocabulary; he saw the problem as one of locating the truth of the matter.

Every impression, external and internal, passions, affections, sensations, pains and pleasures, are originally on the same footing; and whatever other differences we may observe among them, they appear, all of them, in their true colours, as impressions or perceptions.

However, his move has an unfortunate result. It undermines the original duality between subject and object, since the new object, perception, now properly belongs to the subject. Thus, the independence and externality of what we ordinarily treat as independently existing objects in an external world comes into question, and the original duality threatens to collapse into idealism or solipsism.

Hume avoids this result by extending his deployment of the language of perception to the notion of self. This move effectively deconstructs the subject. He uses the language of perception as the standard by which objects must be measured. He takes this strategy to its limit. The result is that self destructs leaving only sequences of perceptions, on the same footing as those that we treat as constitutive of objects.

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128 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 190, emphasis added.

129 idem, p. 190-191.

130 idem, p. 189-192.
First, he redescribes what are ordinarily taken to be independently existing qualities as *impressions*.

We may observe, that *there are three different kinds of impressions* convey'd by the senses. The first are those of figure, bulk, motion and solidity of bodies.\textsuperscript{131}

Qualities, such as figure, bulk, and motion, which, in the language of objects, are treated as caused by independently existing objects, he redescribes as *impressions*.\textsuperscript{132} Since all impressions are nothing but perceptions arising from the particular configurations and motions of the parts of the body, wherein possibly can their difference consist?\textsuperscript{133}

Hume is here adopting Berkeley's objection to Locke's distinction between primary and secondary qualities.

... your concessions, nowhere tended to prove that the secondary qualities did not subsist each alone by itself, but that they were not *at all* without the mind. Indeed, in treating of figure and motion we concluded they could not exist without the mind, because it was impossible even in thought to separate them from all secondary qualities, so as to conceive them existing by themselves ... I am content to put the whole upon this issue. If you can conceive it possible for any mixture or combination of qualities, or any sensible object whatever, to exist without the mind, then I will grant it actually to be so.\textsuperscript{134}

\textsuperscript{131} *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 192, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{132} Hume distinguishes here between this, first type, those of colours, tastes, etc. and those of pains and pleasures. The division is not of concern here, but the manner in which he redescribes all three types of qualities, namely, as impressions.

\textsuperscript{133} *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 192-193.

Hume criticizes the notion of *substance*, under various descriptions: the “peripatetic” notion of *original* matter,\(^\text{135}\) the notion of *primary qualities* that he finds in what he calls “the modern philosophy” (that is, Locke’s theory\(^\text{136}\)), Spinoza’s *simple and unvarying substance*,\(^\text{137}\) and the notions of *mode* and *substance*\(^\text{138}\) that he attributes to the scholastics or Theologians.\(^\text{139}\)

Secondly, Hume draws a distinction between the notion of *substance* and that of *perception*. He argues that no underlying substance is required to maintain perceptions.

"We have no perfect idea of anything but a perception. A substance is entirely different from a perception. We have, therefore, no idea of a substance. Inhesion in something is suppos’d to be requisite to support the existence of our perceptions.\(^\text{140}\) Nothing appears requisite to support the existence of a perception.\(^\text{141}\)"

We might describe Hume’s conclusion as denying the necessity of substance as individuator. The indivisible, unchanging, enduring something that constitutes identity disappears under this description. Hume’s use of the language of perception dismantles the notion of the natural object, piece by momentary piece, revealing that there is nothing identifiable that meets the criteria for numerical identity, no observable unchanging substance that serves to identify individuals. Since there is nothing empirically accessible that persists unchanged, the idea that such a substance serves to confer identity is unintelligible. ("We have, therefore, no idea of a

\(^{135}\text{Treatise}, \text{Book I, Part IV, Sect III, p. 221.}\)

\(^{136}\text{idem, Sect IV, p. 226-227.}\)

\(^{137}\text{idem, Sect V, p. 240-241.}\)

\(^{138}\text{idem, p. 243.}\)

\(^{139}\text{ibid.}\)

\(^{140}\)Here Hume appears to be referring to a position such as Descartes’ famous wax-impression metaphor for the substance-quality distinction.

\(^{141}\text{Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect V, p. 234, emphasis added.}\)
substance.”142) That is, Hume’s use of the language of perception frees the notion of individual
from the idea of an indivisible, unchanging, *something* persisting through time.

Furthermore, Hume argues that the distinction we ordinarily make between subject and
object, that is, between internal and external, is a product of the imagination.143

But not to lose time in examining, whether ’tis possible for our senses to deceive us, and
represent our perceptions as distinct from ourselves, that is as *external* to and *independent* of us;
let us consider whether they really do so, and whether this error proceeds from an immediate
sensation or from some other causes.144

He redescribes what we ordinarily treat as “our body”145 using the language of perception as
the standard. (Note his use of “properly speaking”.)

Properly speaking, ’tis not our body we perceive, when we regard our limbs and members, but
certain impressions, which enter by the senses; so that the ascribing a real and corporeal
existence to these impressions, or to their objects, is an act of the mind as difficult to explain, as
that which we examine at present.146

The impressions that we take to be internal, part of our *selves*, are “on the same footing”147
as those that we take as external, part of independently existing objects. The difference between
what we take to be impressions of ourselves and those we take as impressions of external
objects is founded on the imagination,148 and is not given by impressions *per* impressions.

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142 *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect V, p. 234, emphasis added.
143 *idem*, Sect II, p. 192.
144 *ibid*.
146 *ibid*.
He goes on to argue that sounds, tastes, and smells, although (precritically) regarded as independent and continuing, cannot “appear to the senses as situated externally to the body”.\textsuperscript{149} In other words, the appearance of sounds, tastes, etc., per impression, does not carry with it the idea of externality. Likewise, sight does not directly involve the notion of distance. The notion of distance involves “a certain reasoning and experience, as is acknowledg’d by the most rational philosophers”.\textsuperscript{150}

As far as the senses are judges, all perceptions are the same in the manner of their existence.\textsuperscript{151}

Likewise, the notion of the independence of our perceptions is not derived from impressions themselves.

We may, therefore, conclude with certainty, that the opinion of a continu’d and of a distinct existence never arises from the senses.\textsuperscript{152}

We may think that Hume leaves us with an ontological distinction between mind and its perceptions, but not even this remains.

I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes cannot turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions ... nor is there any single power of the soul, which remains unalterably the same, perhaps for one moment. The mind is 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. There is properly no simplicity in it at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. The comparison of the theatre must not mislead us. \emph{They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind;}

\textsuperscript{149} \textit{idem}, p. 191.

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{ibid}.

\textsuperscript{151} \textit{Treatise}, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 193.

\textsuperscript{152} \textit{idem}, p. 192.
nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is compos’d. 153

Perceptions are totally constitutive of what Hume calls mind; they require no substance in which to inhere. In this passage, it appears that he is claiming that “an individual thing is just a bundle of qualities.” 154 It appears that Hume takes individuals to be constituted by sequences of perceptions, that he is substituting, in the stead of an unobservable substance as individuator, sequences of perceptions as individuator. In what follows I will try to show that he need not be taken as upholding this kind of negative theory of substance. Instead, he may be taken to be claiming that continued existence is entirely a matter of how the imagination conceives impressions as identifiers. After all, his use of the language of perception redescribes, as the product of the imagination, certain distinctions that we ordinarily take as ontological.

So that upon the whole our reason neither does, nor is it possible it ever shou’d, upon any supposition, give us an assurance of the continu’d and distinct existence of body. That opinion must be entirely owing to the imagination. 155

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153 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 252-253, final emphasis added.


Summary

Hume treats the subject (self) similarly to the way he treats the object, redescribing both as impressions, that is, as on the same footing and as the constituents of mind. The subject-object duality is dissolved on both sides of the duality, not even simplicity or identity properly remains. Hume's use of the language of perception entirely dismantles the underpinnings of ontologically-based distinctions, grasped by reason, between subject and object, internal and external, primary and secondary qualities. He argues that the distinctions among impressions that give us the opinion of the independent endurance of objects are derived from imagination, the vivacity of ideas. This is a sobering, and a humbling conclusion, one that might lead us to be "difident of [our] philosophical doubts, as well as of [our] philosophical conviction".

1.4. Hume Exposes The Fiction of Homogeneity

The time has come to fulfil a promise, made earlier in this essay, of a detailed examination of what I called the fiction of homogeneity:

All the disputes concerning the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction or imaginary principle of union.

The etymological sense of 'individual' is an example of what Hume calls a "principle of union". (Recall that the etymological sense has what were taken to be the "essential" conditions of identity, persistence without change, and uninterruptedness.) This section is

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156 *idem*, Sect VII, p. 265.

157 *idem*, p. 273.


159 *ibid*. emphasis added.

preparatory to Chapter Two, which will argue that Hume’s writing on *identity* provides the materials to reconstruct a notion of *identity* that is consistent with the use of ‘perception’.

1.4.1. The Power of Imagination

Hume’s use of the language of perception as a standard enlarges the scope of the language of imagination. This section argues that his strategy fictionalizes (reveals as a fiction) aspects of experience that we might ordinarily take as independently existing. His strategy transforms what we ordinarily take as ‘the world’ from something conceived as having a fixed ontological structure, that is, as having an enduring existence independent of perception, into a flexible construct ripe for redescription.

Recall from the previous section that Hume treats all perceptions as “on the same footing”\(^{161}\) because “as far as the senses are judges, all perceptions are the same in the manner of their existence”.\(^{162}\) The way that we distinguish among perceptions is “founded neither on perception nor reason, but on the imagination”,\(^{163}\) namely, on “the vivacity of ideas”.\(^{164}\)

He takes an everyday sort of occurrence, hearing a door open, and redescribes that experience in a way that fictionalizes portions we ordinarily take to be factual.

*I am here seated in my chamber with my face to the fire; and all the objects, that strike my senses, are contain’d in a few yards around me.*\(^{165}\)

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\(^{161}\) *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 192.

\(^{162}\) *idem*, p. 193.

\(^{163}\) *idem*, p. 192.

\(^{164}\) *idem*, Sect VII, p. 265.

\(^{165}\) *idem*, Sect II, p. 196.
Recall that “nothing is every really present to the mind, besides its own perceptions”.166

Relying on his distinction between impressions and ideas, Hume counts only what is immediately sensed as actual.

My memory, indeed, informs me of the existence of many objects; but then this information extends not beyond their past existence, nor do my senses or memory give any testimony to the continuance of their being.167

Impressions are more ‘lively’ than ideas, thus they count as actual, while everything outside of what is immediately sensed is fictionalized; this move makes flexible what is ordinarily conceived as having a fixed ontological status, providing an opening through which restructuring can be accomplished. Hume’s use of the notion of a fiction removes the unquestioned attribution of *truth* to what we ordinarily take as factual. It introduces the possibility of error, in fact he strongly suggests that there may be an error. Furthermore, the use of the notion of *fiction* suggests that our ordinary notion of the world is one narrative, and that others are possible.

He likens what he diagnoses as a *fiction* to a superstition.

The opinions of the antient philosophers, their fictions of substance and accident, and their reasonings concerning substantial forms and occult qualities, are like the spectres in the dark, and are deriv’d from principles, which, however common, are neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature.168

He fictionalizes (“spectres in the dark”169) the notion of *continued existence* (as constituted by something unchanging that *survives* change). In doing so Hume renders the notion of identity

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166 *idem*, p. 197.


168 *idem*, Sect IV, p. 226.

169 *ibid.*
through time malleable, thereby providing an opening for its redescription (The fiction of homogeneity is “neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature”.

I ask the reader to bear in mind that the account we are about to consider is oversimplified, for the purposes of illustration.

I hear on a sudden a noise as of a door turning upon its hinges.

Notice Hume’s use of language as he describes what we ordinarily might describe as ‘hearing the sound of a door opening’. (Compare his description to one using the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’. We get ‘I have a perception (a sudden noise) of a door turning upon its hinges’.) In Hume’s sentence, the ‘sudden noise’ is the object of the verb ‘hear’. It is important to note here, and to keep in mind as this discussion progresses, that the ‘sudden noise’ is an instance of the individuation of what counts as a kind of impression from a background of other impressions, from which other items might just as well be, and indeed are, individuated.

In addition, because the use of ‘a sudden noise’ is treated as an instance of perception, it parallels the use of the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’. The ‘sudden noise’ takes on the perceptual content of what is ordinarily taken as an object (‘the door’) and the latter may be treated as void of content (“as of . . . ”). In other words, because all that counts as actual is what is immediately sensed, the sound cannot be described in our ordinary manner, as originating from an existing object. The existence of the door has been fictionalized.

In Hume’s story he is facing the fireplace, his back to what we would ordinarily describe as ‘the door’. His perception of his surroundings does not include any visual perception of what we would ordinarily describe as ‘the door’. He perceives, of what ordinarily counts as a perception of a door in motion, only a sound, “as of a door moving on its hinges”. This perception is


171 idem, Sect II, p. 196, emphasis added.
individuated from a background of other perceptions, for example, the fire in the grate, the
texture of the armchair, etc.

According to Hume’s positive principle of identity, the individuation of ‘the sound’ must be
the result of a resemblance among a sequence of impressions that results in their being
associated. In addition, the association of ‘the sound’, once individuated on this occasion, with
the notion of ‘a door in motion’ (‘as of’) relies upon a further principle from his doctrine of
resemblance:

when we have found a resemblance among several objects, that often occur to us, we apply the
same name to all of them, whatever differences we may observe in the degrees of their quantity
and quality, and whatever other differences may appear among them.172

In this instance Hume has an impression that resembles one that he has heard previously, one
to which he learned to apply the label: ‘the sound of a door turning upon its hinges’. Notwithstanding any distinguishable differences between the present impression and past
occurrences, the resemblance among them leads him to apply the same name to this impression.

I never have observ’d, that this noise cou’d proceed from anything but the motion of a door.173

It is implicit in this short statement that sounds similar to the one he is now labelling ‘the
noise as of the motion of a door’ have been experienced, in the past, against other kinds of
backgrounds, which included, for example, other kinds of visual and tactile impressions.
Memory informs him that the sound is similar to some in the past, to which he has come to
apply the name ‘the sound of a door in motion’. Furthermore, that sound is unlike any other
sound in his experience.


173 idem, Part IV, Sect II, p. 196.
In this case, because his back is to the door, the sound is embedded in a background of perceptions that differ from those that formed its background in the past. In other words, he is not having any accompanying visual or tactile sensations similar to those that, in the past, he has become accustomed to experience as accompanying the sound. The visual and tactile impressions that, instead, form the background for that sound in this instance are, say, those that he individuates as, and has learned to label as ‘a fire in the grate’, ‘the texture of the fabric of the armchair under his hand’, etc. These are not the sorts of impressions that get picked out as belonging to ‘the noise’. That is, he does not connect them with the sound in the way that certain other impressions get picked out of experience as connected to those that he labels as ‘a door in motion’.

He claims that the occurrence of what henceforth, for convenience, I will call ‘the sound’, by itself— that is, without impressions similar to those that have in past experience come to be connected with it—contradicts his past experience. If he associates the sound with the background in which he presently finds it, then his past experience is contradicted. Or, if he treats the sound as entirely isolated from the sorts of impressions with which it has been associated in past experience, then all of his past experience of what was associated with that sound is, on his view, contradicted. For example, in the past, ‘the sound’ was individuated and came to be associated with other individuated impressions.

This set of impressions came to be taken together; ‘the door’, as associated qualities of an object, was individuated as a single item. A sentence such as, ‘That is the sound of a door moving upon its hinges’, which was true in the past, would, under the present circumstances, be false. In this sense his past experience would be contradicted. ‘The sound’, distinguishably different from all other sounds, would, in his present circumstance, needs be taken as a quality.

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of 'the fire in the grate', say, or 'the chair'. The result would be an instability in experience that Hume labels a 'contradiction'.

To consider these phenomena of . . . the letter in a certain light, they are contradictions to common experience, and may be regarded as objections to those maxims, which we form concerning the connexions of causes and effects.175

Why this might count as a contradiction becomes more evident when we think about the manner in which the notion of cause and effect enters the picture. Say he had associated the idea of the door with that of the sound, because they had been regularly associated in experience. In other words he had come to conceive of the opening of the door as the cause of the sound. Presently, however, the sound occurs without its associated impressions. Instead he perceives it in the context of an entirely different background. Nothing else is actually present to his perception. The sentence, 'That is the sound of a door in motion', cannot, under these circumstances, be true, although it was in the past. He cannot avoid this "contradiction", this instability in the individuation of objects, without "the supposition"176 that

the door, which I remember on t'other side of the chamber, be still in being.177

Two important moves are being made in this passage. First, the existence of the door has been fictionalized; it is now a 'supposition'. What we might ordinarily treat as independent, as part of the 'furniture of the world', so to speak, Hume redescribes as an hypothesis 178 by means

175 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 196.

176 idem, p. 197.

177 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 196.

178 idem, p. 197.
of which the contradiction between past and present experience is resolved.\textsuperscript{179} His strategy renders the notion of \textit{externally existing object} flexible to redescription.

The second move is one concerning \textit{causality}. It might appear that, in this passage, Hume is trying to smuggle the notion of \textit{causality} into his theory, but he is not. Someone might argue, for example, that the repetition, in the past, of the sort of sounds being considered (namely, 'as of the turning of a door on its hinges'), preceded and accompanied by certain kinds of visual impressions, and, perhaps, of certain kinds of tactile impressions, leads us to think of the sound as \textit{caused} by the opening of the door. That one might claim that the series of events just described fits at least one of Hume's definitions of cause:

\begin{quote}
 an object precedent and contiguous to another, and so united with it, that the idea of the one determines the mind to form the idea of the other, and the impression of the one to form a more lively idea of the other.\textsuperscript{180}
\end{quote}

That is, one might argue that impressions similar to the one Hume labels as 'the sound' have in the past been accompanied by visual and other impressions, so that the idea of 'the sound' (produced by its impression), determines the mind to form the ideas derived from the other sorts of impressions by which it has typically been accompanied. In the past the visual and other accompanying impressions that preceded the sound (the door closed) have preceded the auditory and other impressions labelled as 'the door opening'; as a result the sound has been treated as \textit{the effect} of the motion of the door. Thus, the idea of the continuing existence of the door is dependent upon the causal relationship taken to exist between the door (the visual and other impressions) and the sound.

Hume, however, argues to the contrary. Recall that the experience of the sound, in the absence of its usually accompanying impressions,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{179} \textit{ibid.}.
\end{footnotesize}

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{180} \textit{Treatise}, Book I, Part III, Sect XIV, p. 170.
\end{footnotesize}
may be regarded as objections to those maxims, which we form concerning the connexions of causes and effects. I am accustom'd to hear such a sound, and see such an object in motion at the same time. I have not receiv'd in this particular instance both these perceptions. These observations are contrary, unless I suppose that the door still remains, and that it was open'd without my perceiving it: And this supposition, which was at first entirely arbitrary and hypothetical, acquires a force and evidence by its being the only one, upon which I can reconcile these contradictions. There is scarce a moment of my life, wherein there is not a similar instance presented to me, and I have not occasion to suppose the continu'd existence of objects, in order to connect their past and present appearances, and give them such an union with each other, as I have found by experience to be suitable to their particular natures and circumstances.181

In this passage Hume is making an extremely interesting and important point about the relationship between individuation and causality. It resists clear articulation and is best got at cumulatively from different directions. It is implicit in what Hume says in this passage that his present experience tells against the treatment of the sound as the effect of the other sorts of impressions (namely, the visual and other impressions) that have in the past preceded it, unless one first hypothesizes the continuing existence of the door. That is, unless one has a notion of the door as an individual there is no reason not to associate the sound, when it is experienced in isolation from the sorts of impressions that accompanied it in the past, with the impressions that accompany it in the present.

If we simply apply the definitions of 'cause' and 'effect', we have no reason not to take as associated the impressions immediately perceived at each moment. For example, why not take the sound, say, as being associated with the other presently existing impressions namely, of the fire and the chair? It is entirely plausible that Hume's past experience has often included what we would ordinarily describe as someone opening the door to the study when Hume was sitting facing the fire. These kinds of experiences, of what we are here taking as 'dissociated

impressions', are perfectly ordinary. How do we account for our not associating impressions in this way?

Tho' this conclusion from the coherence of appearances may seem to be of the same nature with our reasonings concerning causes and effects; as being deriv'd from custom, and regulated by past experience; we shall find upon examination, that they are at the bottom considerably different from each other ... For 'twill readily be allow'd, that since nothing is ever really present to the mind, besides its own perceptions, 'tis not only impossible, that any habit shou'd ever be acquir'd otherwise than by the regular succession of these perceptions, but also that any habit shou'd ever exceed that degree of regularity. Any degree, therefore, of regularity in our perceptions, can never be a foundation for us to infer a greater degree of regularity in some objects, which are not perceiv'd; since this supposes a contradiction, viz., habit acquir'd by what was never present to the mind.182

In any particular situation, however, we do not merely associate the impressions we directly perceive at that moment with each other. Our association of them is not based upon a calculation of the regularity with which similar combinations of impressions have occurred in the past, as would have to be the case if we were to follow strictly the definitions of cause and effect.

All reasoning concerning matters of fact arises only from custom, and custom can only be the effect of repeated perceptions, [thus] the extending of custom and reasoning beyond the perceptions can never be the direct and natural effect of the constant repetition and connexion, but must arise from the co-operation of some other principles.183

This passage suggests that causal relations among enduring objects cannot be explained by the notion of the constant repetition and connection of perceptions alone. This is a subtle point. Individuating objects from a background, that is, individuating groups of individuated impressions is ancillary to attributing causal relations among them. Otherwise, an instance of what we ordinarily might call 'the sound of a door opening' embedded in a background of what

182 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 197.
183 idem, p. 198.
we ordinarily might call 'a fire in the grate', would, in the next experience of 'a fire in the grate', lead to an expectation of the sound of a door opening as accompanying it (as in a *conditioned response*). Without individuating what we ordinarily call 'the sound of a door opening', it could never come to be so labelled, because it would be associated equally with every kind of background in which it had ever occurred in our experience, and so not associated with any.

The notion of 'the sound of a door opening' requires a greater degree of regularity than can be accounted for by the notion of cause and effect alone. Thus, some other principle or principles must be at work. According to Hume, those principles are the *imagination*, along with the *constancy* and *coherence* of perception.\(^{184}\) It is these very principles that account for the identity through time of individuals. In order to "connect"\(^{185}\) the "past and present appearances"\(^{186}\) of objects "and give them such an union with each other, as I have found by experience to be suitable to their particular natures and circumstances",\(^{187}\) I must first hypothesize that objects endure. This is not to imply that a conscious, reasoned hypothesis is required; for, recall Hume's doctrine that we

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\text{attribute a distinct continu'd existence to objects without ever consulting REASON, or weighing our opinions by any philosophical principles}^{188}
\]

It requires that individuation of objects be ancillary to the attribution of causal relations among objects. It requires the association of similar perceptions and mental dispositions that we

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\(^{184}\) *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 198-199.

\(^{185}\) *idem*, p. 196-197.

\(^{186}\) *ibid*.

\(^{187}\) *ibid.* emphasis added.

may treat as occurring at a time, but which, at least according to Hume’s account, must in fact always occur over some period of time (recall his doctrine of time and change\textsuperscript{189}).

**Summary**

Hume’s use of the nominalizing transformation of ‘perceive’ as a standard seems to objectify perceptions, with the result that they are treated as real, and the continuing existence of objects is fictionalized. What began as a fixed ontological structure, namely, the ordinary objects of experience, is transformed into a flexible construct. He then redescribes what we ordinarily treat as the continued existence of middle-sized objects as a “spreading out in the mind”\textsuperscript{190} of the world “according to memory”.\textsuperscript{191} To Hume the world of objects is “painted in my imagination”\textsuperscript{192} by memory and judgment.\textsuperscript{193} Under this description the identity through time of middle-sized objects is not observable. Thus, ‘identity through time’ in the context of natural objects belongs to a portion of language that is not observational.

Hume criticizes the idea that I described as the notion that there is something unchanging that survives change, that it constitutes the identity through time of an individual. The fiction of homogeneity contradicts experience, and is, for that reason, at odds with empirical method. Something that is “unknown and invisible”,\textsuperscript{194} “new and unintelligible”,\textsuperscript{195} and

\textsuperscript{189} Arguing this point in the detail required to establish it satisfactorily is outside the scope of this present essay, but will be taken up in the larger project of which this essay is a part.

\textsuperscript{190} *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 196.

\textsuperscript{191} *ibid.*

\textsuperscript{192} *Treatise*, Book I, Part III, Sect IX, p. 108, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{193} *ibid.*, emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{194} *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect III, p. 220.

\textsuperscript{195} *idem*, Sect VI, p. 254.
“mysterious”\textsuperscript{196} is not accessible to experiments, and cannot be demonstrated. Therefore, the notion is not useful for empirical enquiry, and should be changed. We need a notion of identity through time that is compatible with phenomenal experience, one that does not invoke the fiction of homogeneity even in, perhaps, more sophisticated versions.

\textsuperscript{196} \textit{idem}, p. 255.
Chapter Two
Identity Requires Change

2.1. A Heraclitean Revolution

The notion of unity, as Hume conceives it, is closely related to the etymological notion of individual.

That unity, which can exist alone, and whose existence is necessary to that of all number . . . must be perfectly indivisible, and incapable of being resolved into any lesser unity.\(^{197}\)

Chapter One argued that the etymological notion of individual was under attack in Hume's analysis. His critique highlights the heterogeneity of experience, bringing the notion of multiplicity to the fore. From his analysis of experience Hume concludes:

There is properly no simplicity in it [the mind] at one time, nor identity in different; whatever natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity.\(^{198}\)

Solutions to problems of identity, however, typically sacrifice heterogeneity at the altar of homogeneity. In this chapter, I will examine some problems associated with that approach and argue that Hume offers an alternative solution, one that resolves the tension between diversity and unity without sacrificing either.

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\(^{197}\) *Treatise*, Book I, Part II, Sect II, p. 31, emphasis added.

\(^{198}\) *idem*, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 253.
2.1.1. Identity is Context-Dependent

Hume’s solution frees identity from unity as well as from multiplicity. He draws a distinction between identity and (what he sees as) the interdependent\textsuperscript{199} notions of unity and multiplicity. On the one hand, he argues that the notion of identity is incompatible with that of unity:

The view of any one object is not sufficient to convey the idea of identity. For in that proposition, an object is the same with itself, if the idea express’d by the word, object, were no ways distinguish’d from that meant by itself; we really shou’d mean nothing, nor wou’d the proposition contain a predicate and a subject, which however are imply’d in this affirmation. One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity.\textsuperscript{200}

The notion of unity is insufficient for that of identity. Moreover, Hume claims, unity is incompatible\textsuperscript{201} with identity. The language of unity is incompatible with the sentence ‘An object is the same with itself’, since, if the sentence is not to be vacuous,\textsuperscript{202} then the subject and the predicate must be distinguishably different.

Wittgenstein makes a similar but more general point in the \textit{Tractatus},\textsuperscript{203}

\begin{quote}
 to say of one thing that it is identical to itself is to say nothing at all.
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{200} \textit{idem}, Part IV, Sect II, p.200, final emphasis added.

\textsuperscript{201} “... both number and unity are incompatible with the relation of identity ...” \textit{ibid.}

\textsuperscript{202} “... if the idea express’d by the word, object, were no ways distinguish’d from that meant by itself; we really should mean nothing.” \textit{ibid.}

If the subject and predicate are distinguishable, then the notion of multiplicity is invoked. Thus, there cannot be something entirely *unified* ("perfectly indivisible, and incapable of being resolved into any lesser unity") enduring through time. In summary, then, the enduring identity of an individual cannot be self-identity.

Hume makes another, related point about *the fiction of homogeneity*. We combine the notion of a single, self-identical object with the notion of time by imagining a single object as existing at two or more distinguishable points of time, that is, we imagine the succession as being only of times (moments), rather than of objects. (Recall his argument that the idea of something unchanging enduring through time is inconceivable.) The idea of numerical identity through time, then, comes about through

a fiction of the imagination, by which the unchangeable object is suppos'd to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects ... This fiction of the imagination almost universally takes place; and 'tis by means of it [the fiction], that a single object ... is able to give us a notion of identity.

On the other hand, Hume argues that the notion of identity is incompatible with that of multiplicity:

A multiplicity of objects can never convey this idea, however resembling they may be suppos'd. *The mind always pronounces the one not to be the other*, and considers them as forming two, three, or any determinate number of objects, whose existences are entirely distinct and independent.

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204 *Treatise*, Book I, Part II, Sect II, p. 31, emphasis added.

205 *idem*, Part IV, Sect II, p.200-201.

206 *idem*, p.200, emphasis added.
Hume has shown that, in our experience of natural objects, there is nothing identifiable that survives change. He criticizes the use of the language of identity that is accompanied by the fiction of homogeneity. We seem to be caught on the horns of a dilemma. We cannot associate identity with unity, but neither can we associate it with multiplicity.

Since then both number and unity are incompatible with the relation of identity, it must lie in something that is neither of them.\(^{207}\)

We need some third alternative. Jonathan Bennett suggests that there is some “clear Fregean space in between”\(^{208}\) He claims:

Identity is an objectivity-concept. If Frege is right, we can formulate an identity-statement only if we assign two or more properties to some item, or can credit some item with a history.\(^{209}\)

That is, Bennett assumes the existence of ‘some item’ to which to assign ‘properties’. This move is consistent with Hume’s account (discussed in Section 1.4.1.) of how we “connect” the “past and present appearances”\(^{210}\) of what we take to be the same objects by supposing ‘their’ continued existence. Bennett’s solution has an advantage. It avoids treating two temporal stages (perceptions in Hume’s terminology) as numerically identical. Nevertheless his treatment invokes a species of the fiction of homogeneity.

‘The car I drove today is the one I washed yesterday’ does not identify one thing-stage with another. Its first five words do not refer to a car-stage at all, nor do its last five. Rather, they refer—through a partial description of its state during part of its history—to an enduring car. We can express ‘The car I drove today is the car I washed yesterday’ in terms of car-stages, but we must be careful to express it not in the form


\(^{210}\) *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 197.
The F car-stage is identical with the G car-stage

but rather in the form

The F car-stage has relation R to the G car-stage;

where R is the relation of being so linked as to constitute stages of a single car.\footnote{Bennett, \textit{Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes}, p. 337, final emphasis added.}

We might describe Bennett’s notion as one in which the identity of the car \textit{tolerates} change. The identity of the \textit{single car} tolerates the change from its F stage to its G stage, from the washing yesterday to the driving today. It also tolerates a change, say, from an A stage, of having all new parts, to an H stage, in which one of its parts—say a spark plug—has been replaced. This solution retains a version of \textit{the fiction of homogeneity}.

In an example remarkably similar to Bennett’s, Hume shows this version of \textit{the fiction of homogeneity} at work

There is, however, another artifice, by which we may induce the imagination to advance a step farther; and that is, by producing a reference of the parts to each other, and a combination to some \textit{common end} or purpose. A ship, of which a considerable part has been chang’d by frequent reparations, is still consider’d as the same; nor does the difference of the materials hinder us from ascribing an identity to it. The common end, in which the parts conspire, is the same under all their variations, and affords an easy transition of the imagination from one situation of the body to another.\footnote{Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 257.}

Applying this analysis to Bennett’s solution, Hume might argue that the common end, represented by the enduring car, in which all the car-stages conspire, is conceived of as remaining numerically identical despite all the variations in its stages. We might describe the
relationship as *functional*. The multiplicity of stages or states of the enduring car function as a unity.

Recall that the fiction of homogeneity is one of "a real existence of which we are insensible", in this case, the *enduring car*. Its future and past stages are not present impressions, thus, they are "insensible", nor is there any sensible connection between its present stage and its past stages. Its stages are connected by the imagination, as a result of the resemblance among the sequence of perceptions constituting our experience of the car. The *enduring car*, of which its several car-stages (namely, interrupted perceptions) are parts related to a common end, is taken as a single individual, a "real existence". On Hume's view, Bennett's *enduring car* is an example of the fiction of homogeneity. The richness of change and multiplicity that is typical of our ordinary experience of identity at a time is sacrificed to satisfy the requirement for unity over time.

Furthermore, if you have not got all of the car until you have all of its stages, as indeed you do not on Bennett's view, where is the notion of something *enduring*, that is, where is there room for anything *remaining*? Bennett has not provided an account of continuing identity but one of identity *over* time; the identity of Bennett's *car* is rigid and susceptible to Parmenides' criticism of Socrates' notion of *forms*, as recounted by Plato:

I like the way you make out that one and the same thing is in many places [times] at once, Socrates. You might as well spread a sail over a number of people and then say that the one sail as a whole was over them all. Don't you think that is a fair analogy?

Perhaps it is.

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213 *idem*, Sect II, p. 199.

214 *ibid.*
Then would the sail as a whole be over each man, or only a part over one, another part over another?

Only a part.

In that case, Socrates, the forms themselves must be divisible into parts, and the things which have a share in them will have a part for their share. Only a part of any given form, and no longer the whole of it, will be in each thing.²¹⁵

The *rigidity* of the identity of Bennett’s *enduring car* fractures, just as Socrates’ *forms* do under Parmenides’ analysis.

As Hume has argued, and as Bennett admits, what we observe is a multiplicity of states: heterogeneity, not homogeneity. Bennett explains at the outset that his notion of identity through time admits of some degree of multiplicity:

A serial identity-statement does involve distinct things-at-a-time²¹⁶

His solution invokes the notion of a *single* thing that exemplifies one of Hume’s accounts of the manner in which *the fiction of homogeneity operates*:

The unchangeable object is suppos’d to participate of the changes of the co-existent objects, and in particular of that of our perceptions.²¹⁷

Although it does not treat two stages as numerically identical, Bennett’s solution, nevertheless, may be described in Humean fashion: as making use of the fiction of an


unchangeable object existing at two points in time,\(^{218}\) by subsuming its changes (as parts) under an overarching whole.

Hume's analysis is similarly applicable to Bennett's initial formulation of his solution:

a pair of terms with different *senses* but the same *reference*—as in 'The Progressive Party's candidate for mayor is the man who supervised the wiring of the Dreamland Theatre'.\(^{219}\)

In this case it is the notion of *an enduring man* that represents the "real existence" that connects "the interrupted perceptions". Thus, Bennett's *enduring identity* is, under Hume's description, a species of *the fiction of homogeneity*. The stage that took part in the candidacy contest and the stage that supervised the theatre wiring are subsumed under the whole. But the whole, as a whole, has no room for endurance.

Furthermore, Bennett's solution does not solve the nest of problems that have come to be labelled 'the ship of Theseus'. Hume points out one example:

In like manner, it may be said without breach of the propriety of language, that such a church, which was formerly of brick, fell to ruin, and that the parish rebuilt the same church of freestone, and according to modern architecture. Here neither the form nor materials are the same, nor is there any thing 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. But we must observe, that in these cases the first object is in a manner annihilated before the second comes into existence; by which means, we are never presented in any one point of time with the idea of difference and multiplicity; and for that reason are less scrupulous in calling them the same.\(^{220}\)

This problem has been much discussed in the literature. My point here is that Hume was not unaware of the kind of solution that Bennett proposes, albeit Hume's rendering did not have the notational sophistication of Bennett's. But Hume did not consider this as an acceptable solution.

\(^{218}\) *ibid.*

\(^{219}\) Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes*, p. 335.

\(^{220}\) *idem*, p. 258.
because it invokes a species of the fiction of homogeneity, a real existence,\textsuperscript{221} that is, something inaccessible to perception, which unites interrupted perceptions.

2.1.2. A Middle Path

In framing his solution Hume employs the metaphor of a mathematical mean. His notion of identity is one that is usefully vague and ambiguous. He conceives the identity of objects as pliant, amenable to the notion of unity as well as of multiplicity. Resemblances among perceptions lead the mind towards the notion of unity, and differences among what count as the same perceptions lead toward the notion of multiplicity. What we ordinarily treat as the same enduring object may be described in terms of unity or in terms of multiplicity, depending upon our view. (Recall Hume's positive and negative principles of identity.) We may pay attention to resemblances or to differences; our experience of what we ordinarily treat as an enduring object can be viewed either way.

Here then is an idea, which is a medium betwixt unity and number; or more properly speaking, is either of them, according to the view, in which we take it: And this idea we call that of identity.\textsuperscript{222}

A case in which we might ordinarily attribute identity could be seen as either an instance of unity or as one of multiplicity, depending upon whether we are describing resemblances or differences among our perceptions; recall the Rover-Clover example from Chapter One. At some time along the sequence from Rover's dog-stages to Clover's amorphous-mass-stages there would be stages in which the increase in the number of differences among our impressions from those that would ordinarily count as dog-stages would become perceptible to unaided vision. There is a conflict here.

\textsuperscript{221} Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p. 199.

\textsuperscript{222} idem, p.201, emphasis added.
On the one hand, we might make discriminations that would lead us to count them as dog-stages, that is, we might answer the 'same what?' question with the label 'dog'. On the other hand, we might, at the same time, make discriminations that would lead us to count them as 'amorphous-mass-stages', discriminations that, under ordinary earthly circumstances, would lead us to deny that Clover belongs to a kind that is an extension of 'dog'. On both hands we might make discriminations that would lead us to count them as belonging to a kind that is an extension of 'thing that is composed of cells'.

On Hume's view, those of us whose intuitions run with Price's are paying attention to similarities among perceptions, for example, the "continuous" path in space and time recorded by the video camera. Hence, the resemblance relation moves their intuitions in the direction of unity. Those whose intuitions agree with Swartz's judgment are tending to focus on the distinguishable differences. One of Hume's points, in non-Humean vocabulary, is that in every situation in which we observe natural objects, we can consistently make both kinds of discriminations, ones which lead our intuitions toward unity and ones which lead our intuitions toward diversity.

Another point, the one being emphasized in this section, is that the notion of identity mediates between these apparently opposing movements of intuition towards opposing yet complementary ideas. Thus, although, of course, Hume does not talk about sortals, he could answer the question of whether identity-through-time must always be identity under a sortal, by saying that the notion is another use of the fiction of homogeneity, another move that sacrifices heterogeneity at the altar of homogeneity. Given the language of sortals we can say, for example, that with respect to Rover, the notion of identity mediates among an indeterminate number of sortals ('dog', 'mammal', 'thing composed of cells', 'pet', etc.) without being bound to any. 'Identity' may be used with either the language of unity or with the language of number, it is bound to neither.
Summary

Hume's arguments in this and the previous two sections drive a wedge between the notion of identity and that of unity, two notions which are ordinarily much more closely associated than those of identity and multiplicity, freeing them from each other. Thus, his argument frees the notion of identity from the notion of indivisibility, while avoiding its being caught by the pull towards diversity. I will argue that the eventual result of this move is a more flexible notion of identity.

2.1.3. The Argument From Usage

A passage in the Treatise may be used to illustrate the flexibility of the ordinary use of 'identity'.

Suppose any mass of matter, of which the parts are contiguous and connected, to be plac'd before us; 'tis plain we must attribute a perfect identity to this mass, provided all the parts continue uninterrupted and invariably the same, whatever motion or change of place we may observe either in the whole or in any of the parts. But supposing some very small or inconsiderable part to be added to the mass, or subtracted from it; tho' this absolutely destroys the identity of the whole, strictly speaking; yet as we seldom think so accurately, we scruple not to pronounce a mass of matter the same, where we find so trivial an alteration. 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, that 'tis nothing but a continu'd survey of the same object.223

In this passage Hume illustrates his metaphor of identity as a mathematical mean that mediates between unity and diversity. His own use of language demonstrates the flexibility of the ordinary use of the language of identity. Consider an example of a "mass of matter, of which the parts are contiguous and connected", a lump of pottery clay. We may continue to call it the same lump of clay, even if we remove from it a tiny portion. If we were continue to repeat this

223 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 255.
procedure, we cannot determine in advance at what stage we would resist calling it 'the same lump of clay'. That is, it is obviously a matter for empirical enquiry to determine at which stage we would want to cease to refer to it as the same lump of clay.

Both of the paragraphs preceding this one illustrate how we may use language to treat what counts as the same thing in two apparently opposing ways: we may use 'it', where 'it' is used as implying continuing identity, to refer to either mass nouns or count nouns. Both 'the mass of matter' and 'the lump of pottery clay' are used as mass nouns and as count nouns, in different linguistic contexts that count as the same conceptual context. Consider some results of this alternating shift in treatment. Treating both 'the removed portion(s)' and 'the original mass' as count nouns leads us toward the idea of distinct items. Our linguistic practice allows us to use 'the original lump of clay' as a count noun (single continuing item) while, in referring to it later, we treat it as referring to a mass noun ('taking parts from it'). Just a sentence or two later, we may go on to use 'the removed portion' as a count noun, once again leading our intuitions toward the notion of a distinct item.

We might also continue to talk about removing small portions from the larger lump, while we talk about combining the smaller ones. If, again mixing uses of mass and count nouns, we continue to identify 'the original lump' with 'the one from which we have removed a small portion', by labelling it as 'the same lump', then it is not surprising that we eventually might have two lumps competing for the title of 'the same lump'. The fact that, even when we have removed a piece from our lump of clay, we may continue to call it 'the same' is a clue to how puzzles like 'the ship of Theseus' arise. Mixing two apparently opposing linguistic practices creates this puzzle. At the beginning of this paragraph I used 'the original lump' as a mass noun, using 'the same' in the way that we might use it in asking "Was that 'the same potato salad' that

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224 "This 'countability' distinction was often unrecognised in TRADITIONAL grammars, but it has been a focus of attention in LINGUISTIC analyses of the NOUN PHRASE, because of the way it can explain the DISTRIBUTION of nouns in relation to the use of such ITEMS as ARTICLES and QUANTIFIERS... Many nouns can be used in both contexts, e.g. a cake/many cakes/much cake." David Crystal, A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), s.v. 'count'.

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made the restaurant's customers ill?" In a different linguistic context, but what counts as the same conceptual context, I used 'lump' (of clay) as a count noun. Similarly, we might use a count noun 'the ship' to talk about the ship that Theseus took to Crete. We might also talk about the ship stopping on the way to Crete for repairs and about how some planks were removed from the ship (some parts 'of the ship'—mass noun). By continuing to speak of 'the ship' (count noun), while in the same conceptual context talking about removing parts of it (mass noun), we create the conditions for a competition for the title 'the ship of Theseus', a similar competition to the one I created earlier in this paragraph for the title 'the same lump'.

Hume addresses this puzzle in his argument concerning the brick church that fell to ruin. A church, which was formerly of brick, fell to ruin, and the parish rebuilt the same church of freestone, and according to modern architecture. Neither the form nor the materials remain the same, nor is there anything common to the two objects, but their relation to the inhabitants of the parish.²²⁵

In that argument Hume illustrates what we might describe as a compounding of uses. "Church" is used as a mass noun ("of brick") in one context, and as an institutional noun²²⁶—a species of count noun—in another (parish church). The point is that the ordinary use of the notion of identity typically mediates among compounded uses. Hume's example illustrates his claim that the notion of identity may be associated either with unity or with number "according to the view, in which we take it".²²⁷ Using 'church' as a count noun pulls our intuitions toward unity, and towards tighter constraints on what counts as its identity. On the other hand, the identity-constraints for a mass noun pull our intuitions more toward multiplicity. It is in this

²²⁵ Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 258.

²²⁶ see Crystal, A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics. "A developing branch of LINGUISTICS in which the focus is on the language used in professional contexts, such as law, medicine, education, and business." s.v. "institutional linguistics".

²²⁷ Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect II, p.201, emphasis added.
sense that Hume’s solution to problems of identity is *grammatical*. We can conclude from his illustrations of “the mass of matter” and of the parish church that differing uses of language (grammar) produce differing intuitions (imagination) some of which are judged to be conflicting when we compare them (reason).

Hume notes the conditions under which the ‘ship of Theseus’ puzzle arises:

We must observe, that in these cases the first object is in a manner annihilated before the second comes into existence; by which means, we are never presented in any one point of time with the idea of difference and multiplicity; and for that reason are less scrupulous in calling them the same.  

Following, for example, Bennett’s view, an *enduring church* might be conceived as the reference of a temporal sequence of brick-stages followed by free-stone-stages. This solution could work in situations where the brick stages are annihilated before the free-stone-stages come into existence.

However, if we imagine a situation in which a community recycling program saved the original materials and, simultaneously with the erection of the new, free-stone building, reconstructed the brick version, Bennett’s solution runs into difficulties. Since both buildings would then be present at the same time, we would thus be faced with ‘the ship of Theseus’ puzzle, that is, two obviously distinct buildings that our grammatical conventions, perhaps combined with a belief in *the fiction of homogeneity*, have led us into treating as competing for the same label, which our legal and social conventions constrain us to reserve for only one of them. We *may* find a way of hierarchically ordering criteria that will consistently produce a consensus of intuition within particular conventions and particular social contexts, but, I

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228 *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 258.

229 Swartz, *Beyond Experience*, p. 344-351.
suggest, particular hierarchical orderings are also open to question, and are by no means universally agreed upon within one social community much less across more than one.

Hume claims that we are "less scrupulous in calling them the same"230 when one object is destroyed before the other comes into existence, illustrating how ordinary use departs from the conditions considered essential for identity given the etymological sense of *individual*. Descriptions of what counts as the same object often use either mass nouns or count nouns or a combination of both in what counts as the same conceptual context. We might say that what counts as the same object, using more Humean vocabulary, may be treated alternatively as a unity or as a multiplicity, and that the notion of identity mediates between the intuitions that pull us toward unity and those that pull us toward multiplicity. Hume illustrates this practice in the examples I considered in this section. I see his argument from usage, then, as buttressing his metaphor of the notion of identity as a mathematical mean.231 In both cases his conclusions free the notion of *identity*, with respect to natural objects, from the notion of (a perfectly indivisible) unity, showing that *the fiction of homogeneity* is inappropriate to natural objects.

If we take identity as metaphysically real, we are led by the intuitions arising from our inherited use of language (such as the apparently opposing uses of words and phrases as both mass nouns and count nouns) into puzzles like 'the ship of Theseus'. Recall Hume’s claim that *the fiction of homogeneity* accompanies our notion of continued identity.232 If, for example, we take the identity of the church in Hume’s example as a metaphysical reality, we are, on Hume’s view, invoking a species of *the fiction*. Then we are led to think that whatever *that something* (the fiction) is, which makes the original church identical through time, must make the resulting two buildings identical, an outcome that conflicts with ordinary usage. An application of a

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231 *idem*, Sect II., p.201, *medium* between notions of unity and of diversity.

232 *idem*, p. 205.
particular hierarchical ordering of criteria may solve particular problems in particular contexts, but often leads to problems when applied in others. As well, it is extremely unlikely that there will be a consensus of intuitions over what constitutes the true (metaphysically real) hierarchical ordering.

If, instead of treating identity as some kind of metaphysical reality, we treat it in the way that Hume suggested, that is, if we treat it as a quality that we attribute, then a great deal of the force of these puzzles is dissipated. This move leaves us free to discuss a variety of ways of resolving problems as they arise. For example, if the recycled church (original brick) had been reconstructed on another site that, nevertheless, was church property (that is, the institutional relation was retained), and half of the original congregation chose to meet there (retaining a further institutional relation), then we might say that the town now has two churches. On the other hand, if the bricks were hauled away and the building reconstructed in territory hostile to the institution and the congregation refused to meet there, then we might say that the new, freestone, building is the parish church, and turn the recycled one into a welding shop. The point here is that the solution to the problem is derived from the actual context, pragmatically decided upon as opposed to being determined in advance.

In summary, our use of the language of identity moves flexibly, although not arbitrarily, from being associated with the notion of unity to being associated with that of multiplicity and back again. Using a count noun in one context and a mass noun in another is typical of our way of talking about what counts as 'the same' natural object. Depending on the context, then, what we ordinarily think of as the same object may be viewed as a unity or as a multiplicity, that is, identity is not tied to either notion but mediates between them. Our ordinary use of the language of identity supports Hume's attempt to free the notion of continued identity from the etymological notion of individual.
2.1.4. “What Am I But a Compound Frail of Dust?”

Hume claimed that the fiction of homogeneity is “neither universal nor unavoidable in human nature”. This section argues that, while the identity of some objects may tolerate change, the identity of others requires change.

Hume recognized that, for some objects, the notion of identity requires change. I will distinguish two categories: 1) change that supports identity, and 2) change that constitutes identity. The second category is the more interesting of the two. It suggests a notion of identity that is a compound of diversity. My account follows what I take to be Hume’s conclusion, that there is no principled way to decide identity questions in advance. We have developed precedents and conventions for deciding questions of identity in many ordinary situations, but unusual situations, and disputes, must be considered on a case by case basis:

The whole of this doctrine leads us to a conclusion, which is of great importance in the present affair, viz. that all the nice and subtile questions concerning personal identity can never possibly be decided, and are to be regarded rather as grammatical than as philosophical difficulties.

Hume considered the method of explaining personal identity to be the same as his method of his reasoning concerning other kinds of natural objects.

And here ’tis evident, the same method of reasoning must be continu’d, which has so successfully explain’d the identity of plants, and animals, and ships, and houses, and of all the compounded and changeable productions either of art or nature. The identity, which we ascribe to the mind of man, is only a fictitious one, and of a like kind with that which we ascribe to vegetable and animal bodies. It cannot, therefore, have a different origin, but must proceed from a like operation of the imagination upon like objects.

233 The Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. ‘compound’.


235 idem, Sect VII, p. 262, emphasis added.

236 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 259.
I begin by attempting to clear away a possible objection. In one of the passages quoted in *The Argument From Usage*, Hume, in addition to the argument considered there ( ... we say a mass of matter is the same even if it undergoes some small change, such as having a bit added to or subtracted from it.²³⁷), mounts a further argument. He claims that

'tis plain we must attribute a perfect identity to this mass, provided all the parts continue uninterruptedly and invariably the same, whatever motion or change of place we may observe either in the whole or in any of the parts.²³⁸

He argues further that

in a very few years both vegetables and animals endure a total change, yet we still attribute identity to them, while their form, size, and substance are entirely alter'd. An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still the same oak; tho' there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same. An infant becomes a man, and is sometimes fat, sometimes lean, without any change in his identity.²³⁹

Is Hume arguing here that, in general, the notion of identity, as applied to natural objects ('mass of matter', 'vegetables', 'animals') is one that tolerates change? For example, is he arguing that the mass of matter may be said to tolerate the change of place in its parts? Similarly, is he suggesting that the enduring oak might be said to tolerate the changes between its small-plant-stages and its large-tree-stages; an enduring man might be said to tolerate the changes from his infant-stages to his fat-stages to his lean-stages? No. For while we may say that for some objects the notion of identity tolerates change—for example, we may treat an animal (or a species) as the same in spite of minute DNA changes that do not affect morphology—Hume claims that, in some cases, identity requires change.

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²³⁷ *idem*, p. 255.

²³⁸ *ibid*.

²³⁹ *Treatise*, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 257.
Consider this passage:

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. A considerable change of the former kind seems really less to the imagination, than the most trivial alteration of the latter.²⁴⁰

Changes that we treat as “natural and essential”²⁴¹ to a plant or an animal, those that, say, support its continued existence, are changes that may be described as ‘expected’. Metabolic changes, such as breathing and perspiring in humans, for example, support the continuing existence of human bodies; thus, we take them as usual and ordinary. Likewise, changes such as those involved in photosynthesis are taken as usual and ordinary for plants.

It is implicit in the passage just quoted that, because these kinds of changes are expected, the passage of the imagination along the series of resembling impressions is smooth and uninterrupted. Changes such as those that support the continued existence of a plant or an animal, “breaking less the continuity of the thought,” have “less influence in destroying the identity”.²⁴² Recall also, from Section 2.1.1., Hume’s argument that a

reference of the parts to each other, and a combination to some common end or purpose . . .

affords an easy transition of the imagination from one situation of the body to another.²⁴³

There I argued that ‘the reference of parts to each other’ and ‘a combination to a common purpose’ are a species of resemblance. We attribute identity, namely, a connection between what counts as one stage of an object and what counts as another, because of a resemblance between

²⁴⁰ Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 258.
²⁴¹ ibid.
²⁴² Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 258.
²⁴³ idem, p. 257.
the way that the parts are related in one stage and the way that they are related in another, that is, the changes are functional.

Another sort of change, the sort that is more interesting, that is essential, is one that partly or wholly constitutes the notion of the object:

Where the objects are in their nature changeable and inconstant, we admit of a more sudden transition, than wou’d otherwise be consistent with that relation.244

As an example Hume suggests a river. The notion of a river consists in the motion and change of parts; tho’ in less than four and twenty hours these be totally alter’d; this hinders not the river from continuing the same during several ages.245

The notion of a river requires change. Someone might object that a river would be treated as the same river even if it were to gradually become static, say, if it were to freeze. In this case, can the notion of river require change? The seasonal freezing and thawing of a river, however, is another order of change, one which is consistent with the changes required by the notion of river, and is, furthermore, required by the notion of water, of which a river consists. Furthermore, if a river were to be in a permanently frozen state, it would count, not as a river, but as a glacier, whose notion requires different changes from that of river.

Perhaps we treat ‘the water’ (mass noun) just past Kingston as part of ‘the same river’ (count noun) as ‘the water’ at Montreal partly because we use the river for transport, that is, the unbroken connection in the mass of water serves a functional role. We call it ‘the same river’ in spite of its constitutional changes as it passes and receives the chemical stews brewed in places like Cornwall. Because water has a very important use in transport, we pay attention to variations in the way its changes are ordered in different circumstances, between, say, the

244 idem, p. 258.

245 Treatise, Book I, Part IV, Sect VI, p. 258.
manner in which a lake freezes (or behaves in a storm) as opposed to the way a river or an ocean freezes (or behaves in a storm).

One may also wonder whether the fact that we use words both as mass nouns and as count nouns is a source of some other kinds of philosophical puzzles, such as, 'How is it that one thing can be in more than one place at the same time?' For example, we may use 'river' both as a count noun and as a mass noun (its function as a means of transport and its being constituted by water). Using 'river' as a count noun leads our intuitions in the direction of unity and indivisibility (into like parts), whereas using it as a mass noun leads our intuitions in the direction of number and diversity. From the notion of an indivisible unity, we derive the idea that in order to count as the same object the river cannot be in two places at the same time. From the notion of diversity, we are able to treat the river as distinguishable masses of water, which may be said to have distinguishable locations.

Similarly, Hume's own use of the nominalizing transformation of 'perceive' illustrates how we typically use many nouns, such as 'door', both as count nouns and as mass nouns. Consider some parallels: a) 'the river St Lawrence' and 'waters of the St Lawrence', b) 'the door' and 'perceptions of the door', c) 'self' and 'perceptions of a self'.

These considerations raise some very interesting questions, requiring careful and detailed analyses to address, ones which are beyond the scope of this essay to explore.

2.2.1. Conclusions

I have argued that, in the Treatise, Hume frees the notion of identity from the etymological sense of individual, from its unswerving devotion to the notions of simplicity and unity. He uses the nominalizing transformation of 'perceive' to reveal conflicts between imagination and reason at the root of the etymological notion of identity, and to suggest that the language of identity is itself heterogeneous. He concludes that the fiction of homogeneity is not observational, is underdetermined by experience, and that it has implications that create incompatibilities between the language of identity and that of perception. His use of the
nominalizing transformation of 'perceive' serves to fictionalize a portion of language that we ordinarily treat as factual, allowing him to redescribe experience in a way that resolves the conflict that the etymological use of 'individual' creates between the language of identity and that of perception.

Hume's positive and negative principles of identity allow us to conclude that 'identity' belongs to a portion of language that is not observational. Those principles may be taken as empirical or pragmatic principles, ones which do not require an ontological commitment. His arguments concerning the relationship between individuation and causality allow us to conclude that the hypothesis that objects endure is ancillary to the attribution of causal relationships among them, that it is required to stabilize experience.

Hume freed the notion of individual from that of an indivisible and unvarying something surviving change and opened the way to a grammatical or a pragmatic approach to identity attribution. His metaphor of a mathematical mean allows a flexible notion of identity through time for natural objects. It is a notion for which we can say that not only does identity tolerate change, but, because certain kinds of changes are required to support the existence of natural objects, we can say that, in these cases, identity requires change. Since change constitutes the identity of some objects, we may say that, for those objects, identity requires change. On Hume's view, in order to count as enduring through time, an object must consist of a distinguishable series (otherwise it would be a simple unity, not an identity). If the items in the series are distinguishable, then they must represent some (perhaps merely minimal) change from one to the next. From this we may draw the general conclusion that the identity through time of natural objects requires change.

Hume's argument from usage illustrates that we may use the same word in one grammatical context as a mass noun and in a related grammatical context as a count noun. The use of a word as a mass noun is associated with different identity criteria than its use as a count noun. As well, differing intuitions accompany the differing uses. But our notion of the item is constituted by
the sequence, and, thus, by the changes required by that sequence. Thus, the continuing identity of that item requires the changes from the one context to the other. Therefore, our ordinary use of ‘identity’ is flexible, requires the notion of change, and the criteria for the attribution of identity themselves require change.
Bibliography


