



Adam Grzeliński

Nicolaus Copernicus University, Toruń, Poland

ORCID: 0000-0002-4007-6507

e-mail: Adam.Grzelinski@umk.pl

Hume, Personal Identity, and the Experimental Method

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At the beginning of his *Treatise on Human Nature* (1739–1740), Hume writes:

There is no question of importance, whose decision is not comprised in the science of man; and there is none, which can be decided with any certainty, before we become acquainted with that science. In pretending, therefore, to explain the principles of human nature, we in effect propose a compleat system of the sciences, built on a foundation almost entirely new, and the only one upon which they can stand with any security. (THN, Introduction, 43)¹

And in *A Dissertation on the Passions* (1757), we read:

I pretend not to have here exhausted this subject. It is sufficient for my purpose, if I have made it appear, that, in the production and conduct of the passions, there is a certain regular mechanism, which is susceptible of as accurate a disquisition, as the laws of motion, optics, hydrostatics, or any part of natural philosophy.²

¹ All references to Hume's *Treatise* according to the following edition: David Hume, *A Treatise on Human Nature*, ed. Ernest C. Mossner (London: Penguin Books, 1969), henceforth THN; I give the numbers of the book, the part, the chapter, and the page.

² David Hume, "A Dissertation on the Passions," in *A Dissertation on the Passions. The Natural History of Religion*, ed. Tom L. Beachamp (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2007), 29.

Both excerpts come from two ends of Hume's philosophical writing and indicate that his philosophy, at least at the declarative level, was designed as a realization of an idea of a systematic whole: a system of knowledge concerning various aspects of human nature. The first of these relates to Hume's great project of establishing a "compleat system of sciences" of human nature which encompasses logic, morals, criticism, and politics, in which "is comprehended almost everything, which it can any way import us to be acquainted with, or which can tend either to the improvement or ornament of the human mind" (ibid.). These sciences, which are based on certain basic principles (the fact that ideas originate from impressions, the role of associations in the structuring of experience and the like) were to fulfil the ideal by "introducing experimental method into moral subjects" which Hume announced in the subtitle to his main work. Building knowledge about man would be modelled on experimental study of nature – it would be limited to phenomena and to formulating laws with respect to them, which would be a generalization of observations. The conclusion of *A Dissertation on the Passions* seems to indicate that Hume had not abandoned hope to build such science on human nature. Thus, Hume claims that even in the emotional human life one can notice "a certain regular mechanism, which is susceptible of an accurate disquisition". But what meaning can be attributed to such an application of the experimental method to the description of human nature? The first, quite obvious answer indicates an analogy to Newtonian physics: Hume, just like the father of modern physics, abandons the speculations of the traditional seventeenth-century metaphysics with its category of substance (spiritual, material and God) and limits his description to the phenomenal world only. No longer is the nature the set of bodies endowed with a certain unknown material structure; rather, it is a whole of phenomena subordinate to rules discoverable by human intellect. At the same time, also the formation of personal identity may only be indicated on the basis of experience and within its boundaries. Moreover, analysing what Hume understands by personal identity can help to additionally identify the specific meaning of Hume's experimental method and justify some of the alleged inconsistencies within his philosophy, especially in his main work, i.e. the *Treatise on Human Nature*.

Personal Identity and the Apparent Incoherency of Hume's *Treatise*

Hume has had a long history of being accused of inconsistencies. It is enough to mention the famous remark by Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge, the publisher of his works, who claimed that "his pages, especially those of the *Treatise*, are so full of matter, he says so many different things in

so many different connexions, and with so much indifference to what he has said before, that it is very hard to say positively that he taught, or did not teach this or that particular doctrine".³ The distinctive inconsistency refers to the relationship between the various parts of the *Treatise* itself, in which the phenomenalist book *Of the Understanding* ends in sceptical conclusions which are completely inconsistent, as David Fate Norton claimed, with the common sense character of the book *Of Morals*.⁴ One cannot resist the impression that this first-glance inconsistency also applies to the issue of personal identity. In one of the most famous fragments of his work Hume writes:

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. They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind; nor have we the most distant notion of the place, where these scenes are represented, or of the materials, of which it is composed. (THN, I, 4, 6, 301)

Sceptical conclusions which relate to the possibility of establishing personal identity within experience result from the analysis of its content and from demonstrating that in order to substantiate the continuous existence of my 'self' as a simple and unchanging substance, it would have to be available in the form of an impression. Yet memory and senses provide but a collection of various perceptions in which none can be seen to fulfil this condition. No perception of my 'self' exists, and if the idea of my 'self' is but a bundle of various perceptions, it can hardly be ascribed with identity in the strict sense. Thus, we read in the final chapters of the *Treatise*:

For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the perception. (Ibid.)

³ Lewis Amherst Selby-Bigge, "Editor's Introduction," in David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998), VII.

⁴ David Fate Norton, «David Hume» *Common-Sense Moralists, Sceptical Metaphysician* (New York – Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982), 9 ff. More recently, Don Garrett devoted his book to finding and commenting on incoherencies within Hume's philosophical system; see his *Cognition and Commitment in Hume's Philosophy* (New York – Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

In the meantime, in his second book Hume writes that “It is evident, that the idea, or rather impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us, and that our consciousness gives us so lively a conception of our own person, that it is not possible to imagine, that anything can in this particular go beyond it” (THN, II, I, 11, 368).

The abovementioned inconsistency between the two ways Hume depicts personal identity (the earlier statement that there is no single impression of it but only a collection of various perceptions and the later one, in which Hume declares that the impression of ourselves “is always intimately present with us”) gained various explanations. As Norman Kemp Smith postulated in his renowned and still actual monograph, the difference results from the order of origin of the two subsequent books of the *Treatise*. According to Kemp Smith, Book II, *Of the Passions*, was written earlier and was influenced by the moral philosophy of Francis Hutcheson. The development of Hume’s own philosophical stance was supposed to lead him to more sceptical conclusions enclosed in the final chapters of Book I, *Of the Understanding*. “It was through the gateway of morals that Hume entered into his philosophy – writes Kemp Smith – and that, as a consequence of this, Books II and III of the *Treatise* are in date of first composition prior to the working out of the doctrines dealt with in Book I. What guided me to these conclusions was the recognition, forced upon me by a closer study of the ethical portions of the *Treatise*, that Francis Hutcheson’s influence upon Hume is much more wide-reaching than has hitherto been allowed.”⁵

In short, according to Kemp Smith, it is the development of Hume’s views that resulted in the inconsistency mentioned above. The rationalistic understanding of personal identity rooted in Hutcheson’s moral philosophy at the later stage of the shaping of Hume’s own philosophy was replaced by its new understanding based on atomistic psychology. Moreover, in his dealing with the problem of personal identity, Hume was supposed to abandon the psychologic atomism for the analogy to a living organism, in which personal identity was understood in biological terms, as a purposeful whole analogous to a living organism. However, Kemp Smith’s interpretation was undermined by Ben Mijuskovic who in his own reading of Hume’s sceptical approach to personal identity narrowed it down to a kind of preparatory function. According to him, Hume’s criticism in Book II was aimed at rationalistic stance with its notion of a simple and immaterial soul and does not reveal his ultimate position. He writes:

⁵ Norman Kemp Smith, *The Philosophy of David Hume* (London: Macmillan, 1941), VI.

Hume never denies that we can reflect on our own states of consciousness, but only that this reflexive awareness is the basis for our notion of the self. Hence [...] Hume does not contradict himself when he subsequently, in Book II [...] insists that we are intimately conscious of our selves. For in Book II he has reference not to an idea of a simple or identical self, but merely to the self present in ordinary reflection, in all our self-conscious acts.⁶

Close reading of the *Treatise* allows Mijuskovic to pose a suggestion concerning another source of Hume's views, namely, Shaftesbury's *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, and Times*. Hume's references to the work evidences the fact that he was aware of Shaftesbury's criticism of Cartesian rationalistic notion of the substantial self. Given that, one has to abandon Kemp Smith's suggestion concerning the relation between Hutchesonian character of Book II and the development of Hume's notion of personal identity in Book I for the simple fact that Hume must have been aware of the criticism of the rationalistic explanation of personal identity from the very beginning. However, on the basis of Shaftesbury's understanding of nature, Mijuskovic stresses the importance of the distinction between the metaphysical fiction of substantial identity and the "natural" fiction; although the latter is not true, writes Mijuskovic, it "constitutes a sufficient ground of personal identity for imputations of moral praise and blame".⁷ Thus, Hume's reference to natural and inexplicable tendencies of human nature can be interpreted not in theoretical, cognitive terms, but rather practical requirements of social life.

The interpretation I would like to defend follows Mijuskovic's approach but explains the relations between the two different descriptions of the personal identity in a more detailed manner. According to it, what Mijuskovic calls "ordinary reflection" is a necessary step in a more complex process of establishing personal identity that should replace its old, metaphysical notion. Seen from this angle, both descriptions – the sceptical and the common sense one – supplement each other no matter what order both of the books were created in. Kemp Smith is right in his discovery of the significance of the book *Of the Passions* which is the keystone of the whole work connecting the epistemological book *Of the Understanding* and the last one, *Of Morals*; however, conclusions more radical than his can be inferred from the observation. The analyses carried out by Amélie Oxenberg Rorty, Pauline Chazan, Donald Ainsle, or Donald Davidson,⁸ reconstructing Hume's views on the affective as-

⁶ Ibidem, 329.

⁷ Ibidem, 331.

⁸ See Amélie Oxenberg Rorty, "'Pride Produces the Idea of Self': Hume on Moral Agency," *Australasian Journal of Philosophy* 68, no. 3 (September 1990); Donald C. Ain-

pect of the forming of human selfhood demonstrate the crucial role of passions in Humean understanding of subjectivity. The affective aspect of human experience, depicted in the second book of the *Treatise*, leads from the initial sceptical and anti-metaphysical position to the “natural fiction” of identity required in the practical life of a person. Thus, instead of the metaphysical notion of *cogito* or a simple, unchanging substance underlying the whole experience, human subjectivity turns out to be a complex entity possessing various strata: autobiographical memory being “a bundle of perceptions”, social self as a result of interrelations with others, and a moral self of an agent necessary for bearing responsibility for one’s past actions and for attributing it to others. This would be tantamount to assuming the primacy of moral philosophy in Hume’s thought and to stressing that what the “new scene of thought” extending before the philosopher’s eyes revealed was not only a new method of philosophising with reference to associationist psychology, but also the crucial role of affective experience in human life.⁹

Although a general consistency of Hume’s philosophy can be thus saved, such a kind interpretation of Hume’s philosophy requires justification.¹⁰ Such a substantiation can be found if one reflects on the peculiar arrangement of Hume’s *Treatise* content, in which the understanding of certain concepts is presented gradually.¹¹ One of the most obvious examples refers to the difference between impressions and ideas. Referring

slie, “Scepticism about Persons in Book II of Hume’s *Treatise*,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy* 37, no. 3 (July 1999); Donald Davidson, “Hume’s Cognitive Theory of Pride,” *The Journal of Philosophy* 73, no. 4 (November 1976); Pauline Chazan, “Pride, Virtue, and Self-Hood: A Reconstruction of Hume,” *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 22, no. 1 (March 1992).

⁹ This is what Hume himself stresses in several places of his *Treatise*. As early as in (THN, I, I, 2, 55) that is the beginning of the epistemological first book, he writes for example that the impressions of reflexion, i.e. “passions, desires, and emotions [...] principally deserve our attention”. Also, in (THN II, I, 11, 367) he explicitly states that “No quality of human nature is more remarkable, both in itself and in its consequences, than that propensity we have to sympathize with others, and to receive by communication their inclinations and sentiments, however different from, or even contrary to our own”. In fact, such a juxtaposition of the quotes can be seen supportive to Kemp Smith’s claim about the reverse order of the creation of the first two books of the *Treatise*. Although the beginning of the first one, from which the passage is quoted, might be seen as a remnant of the approach typical of the second book, I prefer to treat it as a harbinger of the later contents of the work. In the following chapter of the article, I endeavour to present the reasons for such reading.

¹⁰ For the brevity of the argument I limit it to the *Treatise*, though I feel inclined to suppose a wider coherence among other works by Hume.

¹¹ The reconstruction of Hume’s theory of passions can be found in Alfred Glathe, *Hume’s Theory of the Passions and of Morals* (Berkeley–Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1950) and Páll Árdal, *Passion and Value in Hume’s ‘Treatise’* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1966); the discussions are summarised by Marek Pyka in

to “force and violence” as the explanation of the difference at the outset of the whole argumentation (THN, I, I, 1, 49) is completely unintelligible since “perception” is the only technical term already introduced at this stage of the presentation and neither force nor violence can be numbered among perceptions. Instead of being an immediate element of experience, force and violence refer to a certain mechanical explanatory model of human mind patterned on mechanics. Moreover, in the light of the phenomenalist approach in which only elements of experience (various kinds of perceptions) and relations (such as associations of ideas) joining them can be discovered, the model is not the ultimate explanation. Thus, the difference of impressions and ideas might be explained in quasi-physical terms of the “force and violence” but ultimately seems to consist, *inter alia*, in the effect of belief. However, the explication of the nature and role of belief in experience is not elucidated until the third chapter of the book *Of the Understanding*.¹²

The abovementioned example can be supplemented with two others relating to the topic of our interest. The division of passions introduced in THN II, I, 1 distinguishing such classes as direct and indirect, and violent and calm is a general scheme of their later explication. Hume contents himself with the recourse to specifying particular passions of each of the classes. The first of the divisions requires the recognition of the role of sympathy in creating indirect passions which is indicated by the enigmatic assertion “by indirect [I understand] such as proceed from the same principles [as the direct], but by the conjunction of other qualities” but, at the same time, Hume loyally informs his readers that “this distinction [he] cannot at present justify or explain any farther” (THN, II, I, 1, 328). The “farther” sends the readers to the chapter “Of the Love of Fame” in which the mediating role of sympathy is accounted for which makes it comprehensible that certain kinds of passions such as love, hatred, pride, humility, and their dependants can be understood only if the person experiencing them supposes the existence of other persons.

his *O uczuciach, wartościach i sympatii*. David Hume, Max Scheler (Kraków: Universitas, 1999).

¹² There, Hume defines belief as “nothing but a more forcible and vivid conception of an idea” (THN, I, III, 9, 157).

⁵ Some of the interpretative difficulties of Hume’s work appear to stem from not recognizing the differences between three various planes on which human experience is explained. The first is a not yet philosophically elucidated plane of everyday experience using the everyday vocabulary (man, thinking, soul etc.); the second one is the mechanical model of human mind employing quasi-physical terms such as “force”, “violence”, “degree of force and vivacity”, “producing an emotion” and the like. The analysis of the causal relation reducing it to a habit, resemblance and contiguity calls the model in question since causality it is based on can be reduced to simpler elements. Thus, the final plane seems to be the phenomenalist one on which only such elementary components of experience can be indicated.

Analogously, the emergence of calm passions (more properly called sentiments) referring to “the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects” (ibid.) cannot be elucidated before the role of reason is recognized in forming moral and aesthetic judgments. This time, however, the readers can find the explanation no sooner than in the book *Of Morals* where the conception of the impartial judge is developed. The possibility of aesthetic judgments (grounded in “the sense of beauty in composition”) are justified even later – in the essay *Of the Standard of Taste* (1757).

Such examples evidence the complex character of the *Treatise* in which the reasons for particular claims should be sought for in other, sometimes quite distant parts of the work. If such an interpretation is correct, it does not prove the total coherence of all the details of Hume’s philosophical project, though opens a possibility of searching interdependencies between its various parts. Accordingly, the way personal identity is constructed on the basis of experience is presented not only in the final chapters of Book I but all throughout the *Treatise*. The “metaphysical fiction” of the spiritual substance is replaced by a multi-layered construction of human subjectivity, the final of which can be found in the “natural fiction” of the unity and simplicity of a person as a moral agent.

The procedure is divided into several stages. The point of departure for Hume’s considerations is the empiricist destruction of traditional metaphysics with its main category of substance understood as a constant basis for phenomena that condition the subject’s identity: its continuity and numerical unity. Hume proposes his own positive solution to the issue of personal identity indicating the reasons why the concept of subject as an individual, unchangeable, and simple substance is an irremovable fiction of a common sense description of experience. It is quite plain to see that the purpose of the remark on the mind as a bundle of perceptions is to destroy the notion of substance, also in its religious meaning of immortal soul, as Hume adds “and were all my perceptions removed by death, and could I neither think, nor feel, nor see, nor love, nor hate after the dissolution of my body, I should be entirely annihilated, nor do I conceive what is farther requisite to make me a perfect non-entity” (THN, I, IV, 6, 300). This solution is clearly also a criticism of John Locke’s stance that personal identity is guaranteed by the continuity of memory: „as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought – says Locke – so far reaches the identity of that person”.¹³ Hume’s correction, which is also an answer to the famous criticism levelled by Joseph Butler in his *Analogy of Religion*, although it does

¹³ John Locke, “An Essay Concerning Human Understanding,” bk. II, chap. 27, sect. 10 in *The Works of John Locke* (London: Rivington, 1824), vol. 1, 334.

not agree with his conclusions, recognizes not only the unreliability of memory but also the unavailability of the same content over time due to its constant reinterpretation. Therefore, as Butler wishes, “consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity.”¹⁴ However, Hume denies the existence of “one and the same thing or object; the same person, self, or living agent”¹⁵ which Butler defends. What remains is the continuity of changes that the content of memory is subject to, not the identical nature of the same content available in subsequent acts of recollecting.

The anti-metaphysical nature of Hume’s conclusions arrived at the end of the first book of the *Treatise* is the result of its phenomenalist approach: the experience itself, in which individual perceptions and their types can be distinguished, is the area for consideration. This is linked to suspending the assumptions of metaphysics with its category of substance, as well as suspending natural and common sense attitude which makes us accept the real existence of both our “self” and the things that surround us. However, experience as a whole is gradually being structured, divided into subject and object areas. Primarily, it is no more than a certain field within which various perceptions can be distinguished,¹⁶ and it is the *belief* that defines the line of primary division between the subjective and the objective. Understood in a common sense way, it means the man’s conviction of the independent existence of the surrounding bodies. Such an understanding, however, cannot be maintained in the first book of the *Treatise* for a simple reason that the metaphysical notions of existing things are suspended and the notion of subject needs to be defined and filled with content. Therefore, seen from this perspective, *belief* outlines the otherness of certain experience content and delineates the border between that part which is treated objectively and the one which is considered subjective. The conviction that human mind encounters something that is independent of it also means that there is some “I” other than the objective world. The notion of “I” itself, or of my “self”, means no more than a certain pole, or extremity

¹⁴ Joseph Butler, “On Personal Identity,” in *The Analogy of Religion* (London: J M Dent & Sons, 1936), 259.

¹⁵ *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Hume appears to develop a suggestion made by Locke, whose “plain, historical method” enabled him to separate subsequent operations of human mind (ideas of reflection) and led to the postulate of the raw, bare experience, not yet being the object of more advanced acts such as retention, memory, distinguishing, etc. but only of perception. Thus Locke writes of “bare naked perception, [in which] the mind is, for the most part, only passive: and what it perceives, it cannot avoid perceiving” (Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, bk. II, chap. 9, sect. 1, vol. 1, 121). Such an undifferentiated experience, before isolation of particular ideas or perceptions, I call “the field of experience”.

of experience which is filled with more content due to memory, expectations, and associations among ideas. It is difficult, however, to find the identity of this content in various moments in time.

On the other hand, the second of the abovementioned quotes on the „impression of ourselves” which “is always intimately present with us” comes from the book *Of the Passions*. It refers, however, to an entirely distinct aspect of personal identity. It should be noted that Hume concludes the comparison of mind and theatre in Book I with a reservation that it does not provide explanation for this “natural propension we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity” of our person and observes that it is concerned only with “personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination” (THN, I, IV, 6, 301). It is only Book II that introduces considerations on personal identity “as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves” (ibid.). Apparently Hume applies here the same procedure as he does in the places indicated above, signalling certain solutions which are to be explained later. Furthermore, the “impression of ourselves” non-existent in Book I and the „impression of ourselves is always intimately present with us”, as Hume declares in Book II, do not necessarily entail contradiction since in the former it is an impression of sense, whereas in the latter – an impression of reflexion¹⁷. The “self” in the first designation is no more than a collection of memories and expectations – a set of perceptions bound together at a moment of recollection; indeed, no vindication can be given to the constancy of the self thus understood. In the second meaning, the notion of self refers to an impression of reflexion which, though “always present” does not have to be always numerically the same. It should also be observed that the remark on the „impression of ourselves” most intimately present appears in a special place of Book II – in the chapter *Of the Love of Fame*, and more precisely only after the role of sympathy of this “most remarkable quality of human nature” has been discussed (THN, II, I, 11, 367). The process of sympathy enables the understanding of this specific class of passions – indirect passions (or rather sentiments) of love, hatred, pride and humility. Such feelings can only be understood if it is assumed that there is both a subject to whom they are directed and a subject who experiences them. However, such an assumption is not metaphysical (denoting spiritual substances), but refers to a specific experience. Hume’s complicated description of the whole process of “sympathizing with others” demonstrates that the affective experience becomes polarised:

¹⁷ Recently, a similar interpretation has been defended by Asa Carlson in „There is Just One Idea of Self in Hume’s *Treatise*,” *Hume Studies* 35, no. 1–2 (November 2009): 171–184. The author shortly summarizes discussions on the point (ibidem, 182–183). In comparison to his, my interpretation stresses more forcibly anti-Cartesian aspect of Hume’s understanding of subjectivity.

the feeling of love or hatred becomes understandable only when it is inscribed within the relationship between me and another person. In other words, the impression of myself is not precedent to indirect passions such as pride or humility, love or hatred but appears simultaneously together with them.¹⁸ However, the “impression of myself” is not an impression of sense (since such a simple impression does not exist), but an impression of reflection, a passion. Both ways of referring to one’s own subjectivity presented by Hume complement each other and are its two aspects.

The mistake of the seventeenth-century metaphysics boils down not only to postulating the existence of an unknown substantial substratum of experience but also to the fact that it described human identity as separated from other substances – material bodies and other selves. Discussing with the tradition Hume appears to claim that our understanding of ourselves and, consequently, the notion we can have of ourselves, is inseparable from the relations with the world and a society. Hence, the question “Who am I?” gains several consecutive answers. The notion of “man”, being an obvious answer to the question can be sufficient only for the common sense whereas philosophical inquisitiveness requires a deeper analysis. It reveals the fact that “man” is both our body whose fortunes and misfortunes we can recollect and expect and we do so for they concern us but it can also be a person tied up with others in a society: a subject and an object of pride, humility, love, and hatred.

¹⁸ A similar interpretation is presented by Pauline Chazan who writes: “when he [i.e. Hume] says that pride produces the idea of the self, [he claims] that the relation between these two is not a one-way causal relation (whether ‘causality’ is taken in a Humean or non-Humean sense) but, rather, that there exists between these two a relationship of mutual construction ... pride produces the idea of the self because we cannot have the former being constructed without the latter also at the same being constructed” (Chazan, “Pride, Virtue, and Self-Hood,” 51). In the following part of the article, I am arguing that such a construction is not confined to the relation between pride (together with other mediate passions) and self but extends to the whole emotional life of a human being and various aspects of the self. The difference between the aspects or “strata” are implied by disparate kinds of passions: direct, indirect, violent, and calm. The conception of “calm passions” (moral sentiments) involves the “moral self”, or the self of a person as a moral agent in which case the same process of construction can be found. The notion of the self thus structured is not distant from the intuitions of the psychologist William James as Robert Roth observed; see his “Hume and James on Personal Identity,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly* 64, no. 2 (Spring 1990): 235–237.

The Complexity of the Notion of Personal Identity

The shaft of Hume's criticism levelled at the notions of traditional metaphysics completely changes the understanding of human subjectivity and requires the reformulation of the understanding of personal identity. Subjectivity is no longer based on the metaphysical notion of a thinking substance, and personal identity is not founded on the privileged, first-person access to subjective content of thinking. Both of these aspects of identity – sensual and affective – are the result of a progressive structuring of experience in which both poles, the subjective and the objective one, are inseparable from each other as are both sides of the same coin. From the phenomenalist perspective, we may say that the understanding of one's own "self" is not given without understanding the "world" and without referring to other people.

It should be noted, however, that the content accessible through memory is only first-person in character and builds an autobiographical identity. From this perspective, identity is given in every act of recollection, but there is no reason to confirm identity in the successive moments of time. In Hume, the continuity of memory and imagination is complemented by knowledge on the continuity of who I am based on the cause-effect relationship which "patches up" memory imperfections. From this perspective, I cannot even ask about my entire identity with myself at various times – what remains is the conviction that it is me that the past remembered at a given moment and an imagined future concern. But instead of referring to the metaphysical concept of substance (*res cogitans* or soul), which would guarantee simplicity and identity, Hume overcomes the first-person perspective by referring to interpersonal relationships.

It is noteworthy that the issue of identity, apart from its theoretical dimension, also has an obvious practical significance connected, for example, with a moral and legal responsibility for the committed acts. The bias within interpersonal relationships can be avoided by an achievement of a "more stable judgment", guaranteed by meeting the conditions of impartiality in the concept of moral sense in Hume's concept of impartial judge. From this impartial and impersonal perspective it becomes possible to define the important features of a person's character. This is how it is possible to define man as a moral subject. Ultimately, according to Hume, we have no right to claim that a full identity is based on some unknown substance; rather, it can be a legal concept which relates to the functioning of man in human society. Thus, identity, which manifests itself in human experience, is the result of complex psychological and social processes.

Hume's famous admonition that "reason is, and ought only to be the slave of the passions, and can never pretend to any other office than to serve and obey them" (THN II, III, 3, 462) may also be interpreted that the passions which, as we read in the *Treatise*, "principally deserve our attention" (THN I, I, 2, 55), stimulate human life. If we were to quote Hume's three basic types of passions: direct passions (such as desire, aversion, grief, joy, hope, fear, despair, and security) and indirect (pride, humility, ambition, vanity, love, hatred, envy, pity, malice, generosity), and calm (the sense of beauty and deformity in action, composition, and external objects (THN, II, I, 1, 328)), we may be able to see in them the cause of propension to add "something unknown and mysterious" (THN, I, IV, 6, 302) binding the perceptions to constitute the self. Such fictitious metaphysical additions include the notion 'substance' or 'soul'. In contrast, the "natural" fiction is no more than a belief of one's own continuous existence, the feeling of identity with one's previous and future states or can be attributed to a person for practical reasons in their social interrelations. But for Hume, treating such a natural fiction in the metaphysical manner ignores the complexity of human identity and the possible knowledge we can have about ourselves.

Conclusion. Personal Identity and Experimental Method

In conclusion, some general remarks can be added.

1. *Common sense and phenomenalism.* The procedure that Hume follows in the *Treatise* involves, among other things, substituting common sense notions with strict philosophical terms, the meaning of which can be determined by indicating their individual functions of experience. Such an analysis makes it possible, for example, to transform a vague notion of thinking into a precise description that uses terms such as perception, impression, idea and translate individual actions of the mind into relations between perceptions specific to the functioning of particular faculties of the mind – sensuality, memory, imagination, understanding, and reason. In the case of personal identity, the situation is similar. The colloquial term "man" is replaced by a formal notion of "self" and successive layers of identities arranged around this "self": the identity of the human being, of the person and of the moral subject. In addition, Hume explains the rudiments of a common sense attitude towards the world: a tendency to attribute full identity turns out to be a fiction of the mind which appears in the process of our emotional life. The fallacy of the earlier metaphysics, according to him, consisted in unauthorised advocating of the existence of an unknown thinking substance. This notion is converted into a series of designations which can be filled with particular experience.

2. *The analyses of subjectivity carried out by Hume as a development of intuitions of Locke.* Locke distinguishes between a) individual sense of identity through a possibility of reflectively turning to experience (the awareness of the 'self') and the possibility of combining past events through the memory and anticipating future events; b) identity of man as a living being; continuity can be objectively attributed to this identity, but not identicality; c) a person's identity in a logical and legal sense – as notions in judgements that relate to the functioning of a person within a community (in practical, moral, legal, or religious terms), continuity as well as identicality can only be attributed to such identity.

In principle, Hume agrees that the description of a person's identity need not appeal to the metaphysical notion of substance, and he is also partial to accepting a description of identity as a multi-layered construction. Hume's correction of Locke's conception does not (at least not at first) concern the criticism of the role of memory in constructing personal identity. Locke himself highlighted many of its flaws.¹⁹ According to Hume, Locke, who was the successor of the seventeenth-century metaphysics, points to the possibility of intuitively capturing the "self" as something simple.²⁰ This would mean, in accordance with the Cartesian tradition, that the thinking subject can have a cognitive access to its own individual existence in an act of intuition. Yet, Hume argues that it is not possible. It should rather be said that the notion of the 'self' is both the *terminus a quo* and *terminus ad quem* of constructing one's identity within the confines of experience. I can say 'It is me', but in fact without experience I do not know who I am. I can at most say I am a substance that is devoid of content. But what sense can be given to such a notion? I will only be able to fill this "self" with content after I point out to particular aspects of experience, sense and reflection, describe the particular functions of experience and indicate who and what I confront in experience.

3. *The notion of identity and the experimental method.* The positive part of the conception is preceded by negative and critical parts. Thus, the privileged first-person access to my self that would define human subjectivity, as postulated by Locke, is denied by Hume: there is no specific content of my "self" that is identical with itself in time. The point is, however, that Hume's positive project referring to the subject does not end with the presentation of the mind as a theatre of perception, as it is only a starting point for further stages of the formation of personal identity. The assignment of personal identity – just as the assignment of deeds – is done from the outside, from the third person perspective.

¹⁹ See Locke, "Essay," bk. II, chap. X, sect. 5, in *Works*, vol. 1, 130–133.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, bk. II, chap. XXVII, sect. 9, vol. 1, 333.

This entails some broader consequences. Creating the “complete system of sciences” which describes human nature starts with suspending all judgements on matters of fact and existence, and with the statement: „All the perceptions of the human mind resolve themselves into two distinct kinds, which I shall call impressions and ideas” (THN, I, I, 1, 49). It is only provisional in nature as we do not know what in fact the human mind is. Even the term “human” is only intuitive and in accordance with the requirements of the natural language – but not with the proper philosophical terminology. Human nature is only to be revealed on the subsequent pages of the work. Each of sciences has yet to show what subjectivity is at each plane of its manifestation. Only when the principles of logic, morals, criticism, and politics (and one should also add: history) are discovered will it be possible to describe human subjectivity in detail through a number of mutually complementing designations. The Cartesian *ego cogito* was accessible only due to the individual’s insight, and, at the same time, its realness and substantiality was justified by the rational and theological argument for the existence of God. By rejecting Cartesian metaphysics Hume rejects both parts of this reasoning: not only the substantiality of the subject understood traditionally but also the possibility of the cognition originating in the individual itself. Since the very individuality of a person’s existence is based on a metaphysical presumption, Hume takes a different route. Who an individual is can only be understood at the very end, as a result of understanding of the various aspects of human nature. Again, no sooner than the nature of logic, morals, criticism and of politics is established the meaning of their subject is known. Speaking metaphorically, Hume could write *My Own Life* only after creating the *Treatise*.

The system of sciences about human nature in fact relates to the experimental method. And it is not all about the abandonment of metaphysics and a phenomenalist approach to the description of subjectivity. The aim of an experiment is to determine the extent to which a given model of an object empirically fits the reality. The adequacy of the model of human nature created by Hume and distributed among individual sciences may not be verified by comparing it with some outside reality. However, it is possible to verify whether the model is functional and whether the clarified, philosophical description of human nature fits the common sense description and everyday practice – whether it is possible to create a political or moral theory based on it. Hume claims that it is. A new description which resigns from the category of substance but demonstrates that the traditional, metaphysical definition of *ego cogito* as substance, in accordance with its Cartesian understanding, is just cutting corners. It omits psychological and social processes of forming subjectivity. The new description allows for certain corrections to be made in the

understanding of human nature (for instance, by pointing to the affective aspect of experience and correcting the description of the interaction of reason and passions, or by pointing to the fact that it is impossible to provide proofs for existential judgements, thus undermining the possibility of a rational theology). These corrections, which have a primary practical significance allow us to conclusively “cultivate true metaphysics with some care, in order to destroy the false and adulterate.”²¹

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²¹ Hume, *Enquiries*, 12.

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Summary

The article focuses on the connection between David Hume's explication of personal identity and what is supposed to be "experimental reasoning" introduced to moral subjects which the subtitle to the *Treatise on Human Nature* announces. On the basis of the results of analyses of the role of passions in creating personal identity I argue for the general coherence of Hume's work. According to the interpretation, Hume's intention was to present the multidimensionality of human identity in which the autobiographical construction of memory and understanding is supplemented with the identity built upon social relations. Eventually, personal identity finds its fulfilment in a person's moral agency which reveals its practical dimension.

Keywords: David Hume, personal identity, empiricism, passions, sympathy, moral agency

Streszczenie

Hume, tożsamość osobowa i metoda eksperymentalna

Niniejszy artykuł dotyczy związku pomiędzy Hume'owską eksplikacją tożsamości osobowej a tym, czym miałyby być „rozumowanie eksperymentalne” wprowadzone do tematyki moralnej, jak głosi podtytuł „Traktatu o naturze ludzkiej”. Opierając się na analizach roli uczuć w kreacji tożsamości człowieka, staram się bronić tezy o zasadniczo spójnym charakterze tego dzieła. Zgodnie z taką interpretacją zamysł Hume'a polega na ukazaniu wieloaspektowości pojęcia ludzkiej tożsamości, w której konstrukt autobiograficznej pamięci i rozumu uzupełniony jest o poczucie tożsamości budowane na podstawie relacji z innymi, ostatecznie zaś tożsamość człowieka znajduje swe spełnienie w jego funkcjonowaniu jako podmiotu moralnego, gdzie do głosu w pełni dochodzi jej wymiar praktyczny.

Słowa kluczowe: David Hume, tożsamość osobowa, empiryzm, uczucia, oddźwięk uczuciowy, podmiot moralny