



Kristen Morgan-Davie

DAVID HUME ON THE SELF: A RESPONSE TO JOHN LOCKE

Locke: What is the “Self”?

- My “self” is my consciousness.
 - “...self is not determined by identity or diversity of substance, which it cannot be sure of, but only by identity of consciousness.” (AW 375a)
 - The *day man* and the *night man*
- There is a continuous and essential *self* that is part of my consciousness



Consciousness

- Memory: anything I remember doing or experiencing—am conscious of—is part of myself.
 - Connects my past self to my present self
 - A forgotten experience is no longer part of my self.
- Any part of my body is part of my self—I am conscious of it
 - Until you cut it off
 - The chair vs. the tree

Hume: What is the “Self”?

- A collection of perceptions and impressions
 - *"I can never catch myself at any time without a perception and never can observe anything but the perception."* (AW 526a)
- Necessitates a continuous impression of the self; an *Identity*:
 - “A distinct idea of an object that remains invariable and uninterrupted through a supposed variation of time”
 - But is there such an idea for the self?
 - Hume argues no

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There is No Continuous Self

- Hume agrees with Locke's premise, but not his conclusion
 - Locke assumes existence of the self to prove it's existence
 - Hume doesn't allow that
- *"It must be some one impression that gives rise to every real idea. But self or person is not any one impression, but that to which our several impressions and ideas are supposed to have a reference."* (AW 526a)

Consciousness

- For Hume, self is solely perceptions
 - Not one perception, but many
 - Inseparable
- But no impression of self exists continually
 - *Self depends* on a continuous and constant impression
 - So... no self.
- If there's no self, are we really conscious of anything?

The Spiral into Skepticism

- Locke: We can have knowledge of the material world based on sense perception
- Berkeley: Wrong. We can only have knowledge of science and the self.
- Hume: We can have knowledge of nothing; all is sophistry and illusion.





So...

- We have no self.
- Hume attacks Locke's logic and leaves us with nothing certain
- All we have are perceptions
 - But these aren't even a self
- Hume leaves everyone—including himself—puzzled and unsatisfied



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