



David Hume: 18th Century Philosopher

Hume's theory of the self

Winifred

Simon Blackburn is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Cambridge. In this section the Course author, Nigel Warburton, is talking to him about David Hume's theory of the Self.

What does Hume actually say about the Self?

Professor Simon Blackburn

Well Hume, true to his empiricism, his belief that you've got to get back to the experiences which are the foundation of your ideas, he asks what his experience of the Self is. And he meets a blank. He says whenever he looks into his own mind he finds what he called a particular perception that's an experience but he doesn't find the Self, which has the experience. He's got no idea of that. So I think if you want to sympathise with this you might say look, suppose you've got a pain in your toe. You've got the experience of the pain. That's all right. You know you've got a pain that's as it were the idea which is forced upon you by this painful toe. But you know that it's you that's got the pain. Now what's the idea that corresponds to the Self – yourself being the subject here of the pain? And Hume says he can't find such an idea. When he looks into his mind all he finds are things like visual experiences, sounds, flavours, experiences of pain. But he never finds, he never captures the subject of all these experiences. And this subject is very mysterious because it's the Self. And he can't find it. And traditional metaphysics, the rationalists in the century before Hume had looked at this and that well the Soul, you know, this is mysterious. But they'd just sort of resolved the mystery in their own minds by thinking in terms of a Soul as a different kind of substance as something which is the bearer or owner of experience. And then of course they started to fantasise and think perhaps the Soul is necessarily immortal or unchangeable; this sort of thing. Well, Hume's having none of that. You can't draw on these fantasies as he thought of them. So he starts looking for the concept of the Self and he pretty much draws a blank unfortunately.

Nigel Warburton

So here we've got Hume grappling with this idea. He is looking within himself, introspecting, can't find a Self. He doesn't get a direct experience of a Self. All he gets are these fleeting impressions going across a stage, as he puts it.

Professor Simon Blackburn

That's right. It's as if you've got the fleeting actors on the stage. Those are the individual experiences, which change throughout life, but you never have an experience of the stage and that's the problem.

Nigel Warburton

So that's the problem and if he's right it's a real problem because we all have a notion of the Self I think. So how does he go about looking for an answer?

Professor Simon Blackburn

Well he – he sometimes writes as though it will be okay if you could discover something unchanging in the panoply of experience but that's what you can't do so that solution's out. Then he writes as if it would be okay if you could discover real connections between the different fleeting experiences. But he's already in the treatise before this. One of his most famous contributions to philosophy was to deny that there can be real connections as he calls it, between distinct occurrences. It's as if we are condemned to a very pixelated view of reality. We get individual blobs of experience but we never see what connects them together. We have no idea of that.

Nigel Warburton

But when people describe Hume's theory of the Self they often talk about it as a "bundle theory". We've got all these distinct perceptions as you describe them pixelated out there but there is something that binds them all together. We know that there must be something and so he hints at what might tie them together.

Professor Simon Blackburn

Yes. Well, he thinks that a real connection would be necessary to tie them together but he's basically got no materials from which to assemble it as if it were manufacture the string. I think he's – he realises that in the Appendix and you know makes a sort of despairing cry I can't crack this one.

Nigel Warburton

Is that like Derek Parfit's view of the Self where Parfit seems to suggest that all we have is this apparent continuity psychologically but in many cases it doesn't make sense even to talk about will I be the same person in the future.

Professor Simon Blackburn

Yes I mean Parfit drew an awful lot from Hume. Parfit then starts wondering whether a continuous Self, that is an overlapping set of resembling and continuing experiences is as good as personal identity. And that I think rather muddies the waters because it makes it sound like an ethical issue. So for example suppose my son resembles me very much. Well it might be if my son goes to Venice it might be as good as me going to Venice and I'm perfectly prepared to admit. But it's not the same. If I go to Venice it's going to be very different for me than if my son goes to Venice. So I think Parfit in a sense didn't – didn't actually quite as firmly as Hume, rub his nose in the consequences of losing the Self.

Nigel Warburton

So Hume is really talking about metaphysics and psychology here?

Professor Simon Blackburn

Yes. He is certainly talking about psychology. He is worried about this thought of the Self. It's a treatise of human nature and it's the enquiry concerning human understanding. So he's interested in how we think of the Self not as if it were the ultimate ontology or nature of the Self.

Nigel Warburton

Do you think that his reveals that Hume's got it wrong in his basic empiricism because he's assuming that in order to have an idea of the Self there must be some experience which gives rise to it and somebody who is not committed to that empiricist project of linking all our ideas with prior experience won't have an issue here. But for him it's almost a reductio ad absurdum. This is the – clearly we do have an idea of the self. We got to that point but his theory won't actually explain where it came from.

Professor Simon Blackburn

Yes I mean I think that is a – is a worry and it's probably brings us beyond Hume to Kant. I think one of the few areas in which Kant does represent a distinct advance on Hume is over this notion of the Self. Kant saw that the Self was in a way a much more structural notion than an empirical notion. So he thought that Hume was looking for it I think in the wrong place. Kant is very insistent that there's an "I think" which accompanies all my representations as he puts it.

Nigel Warburton

So it was precondition of thinking. You can't have a thought unless there is an "I think" attached to it.

Professor Simon Blackburn

Yes. That's right. That's exactly how Kant thought of it. I think Kant did make an advance here. He did see the need for structural awareness of your occupancy of a point of view in space for example.

Nigel Warburton

Tell me what you mean by point of view

Professor Simon Blackburn

Well I like to illustrate this with the problem a programmer might face. Suppose he's got a little robot and it's got a camera on it and can take sort of pictures of a space that it's in, a room let's say with simple objects dotted about. And suppose you wanted to give you a read out of the geography of the room for example to draw a map of it after it's moved about for a bit. Well, as it moves about it gets more and more pixels unless it's got a way of representing it's own position which in effect is saying, "I am here. I am now looking to the left. I am now looking to the right". it's not going to give you a print out, a read out, of the geography of the room as it moves about it. And I think that's a nice way of seeing the structural requirement for a Self. The robot has to integrate its current perceptions with what's just happened, what it saw before, and try somehow to integrate the whole thing into a geography, which it's then occupying a point of view on. And that's a kind of construction of the notion of a Self. It's a fairly thin Self but it's a Self, with a camera.

Nigel Warburton

From what Hume said and from what Kant said, we are not going to get very far with this question "Know thyself", because for Hume you can't know the Self because you look in there and there's nothing there. And for Kant, it's just a structural phenomenon.

Professor Simon Blackburn

Yes I think that's absolutely right Nigel. Yes. And when people talk about knowing themselves basically they are knowing about their emotions or perceptions or the world around them. And if they stop worrying about their Self they might do better.

Nigel Warburton

Thank you very much