

## THE PROBLEM OF IDENTITY OF OBJECTS IN HUME'S PHILOSOPHY

Hume discusses the problem of identity of objects in section IV, Part I of his magnum opus *A Treatise of Human Nature*.<sup>1</sup> H. H. Price is of the opinion that though this section entitled 'Of scepticism with regard to the senses' is a total failure, its depth, scope and disciplined complexity make it one of the most instructive arguments in modern philosophy<sup>2</sup>. In this paper, I would like to make an attempt to bring out the instructiveness of Humean arguments as regards the problem of identity of objects.

Hume tries to explain the identity of objects with the aid of a single sentence, namely 'an object is the same with itself.'<sup>3</sup> "We may observe (Hume says) that 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 expressed by the word, *object*, were no ways distinguished from that meant by *itself*; we should mean nothing, nor would the proposition contain a predicate and a subject, which however are implied in this affirmation. One single object conveys the idea of unity, not that of identity".<sup>4</sup> His arguments run as follows: the proposition, 'an object is the same with itself,' is meaningless and it does not contain a subject and a predicate. One single object conveys only the idea of unity, but not the idea of identity. Multiplicity of resembling objects too cannot convey the idea of identity since the mind considers the resembling objects to be entirely distinct and independent of one another whatever the number of objects may be. Since both unity and number cannot convey the notion of identity, this notion must be something which is neither of them. But since these cannot be any medium between unity and number, the principle of identity has to be either the notion of unity or the notion of number.

An unchangeable object is supposed to participate in the change of co-existent things as well as our perceptions. This is not possible on rational grounds for the idea of time implies succession. This supposition is possible only by a fiction of the imagination, when we apply the idea of time to the unchangeable

object. A single object without any variation and interruption is able to give us the notion of identity due to this fiction of the imagination. When we consider any two points of time, we may understand them in two different ways as follows : Firstly, we may survey the object and itself simultaneously—this gives the notion of number, because we need to multiply the object and itself in order to conceive them at once as existing in two different parts of time and secondly, we may imagine a change in time without any variation or interruption in the object—this gives us only the notion of unity. The proposition, ‘an object is the same with itself’ is meaningless unless we mean that object existing at one time is same with itself existing at another time. We make a distinction between the idea of object and itself without meaning the idea of number as well as the idea of unity. The principle of identity depends on this sort of definition, namely the principle of identity is nothing but the invariableness and uninterruptedness of any object through a succession of time without forming the idea of number.

Relations are of three kinds, namely, resemblance, contiguity and causality. Of these three relations, the relation of resemblance is the most important and efficacious as regards the notion of identity. This relation not only produces an association between ideas but also produces dispositions. The ideas which place the mind in the same disposition or similar ones are liable to be confounded with one another. The mind passes from one idea to another without perceiving the change due to the inherent inattention of the mind. If we look at an object uninterruptedly, the object preserves a perfect identity. Thus the ideas which produce the same disposition or similar ones are confounded with one another. When our thought is fixed on any object, we suppose it to continue for sometime by considering the change to be in time. Though our impressions are interrupted, we do not produce any new image or idea of the object (the idea of number). The mind passes from an invariable and uninterrupted idea to a variable and interrupted idea without making the distinction between them. This is possible due to the uninterrupted passage of the imagination from one idea to another. Thus we confound resembling objects with identical ones. The passage between the related ideas is so smooth and easy that the imagination considers it as the continuation of the same action without perceiving the

difference between the related ideas and the continuation of the same action is the effect of the uninterrupted view of the same object. This act of imagination makes us attribute numerical identity to the resembling objects.

There are two relations of resemblance, namely (1) the resemblance of the perceptions and (2) the resemblance between the succession resembling object, and an identical object, and we confound these two relations of resemblance with one another. We take our perception to be the object and never conceive of double existence, that is, internal and external existence. The interruptions of these perceptions make us consider these resembling perceptions as different perceptions. Now, this creates a conflict or opposition between two contradicting opinions, namely the notion of identity and the interruption of perceptions. But, we remove the contradiction by connecting the gappy interruptions by the fictitious notion of continued existence.

I think that my discussion of the problem of identity of objects in Hume's Philosophy would remain incomplete unless I refer to H. H. Price's views on the said problem discussed in the book 'Hume's Theory of the External world.'<sup>5</sup> Price points out that Hume is committed to the 'Even theory of continuance' because of the Humean view that there cannot be any idea without a corresponding impression. 'The Even theory of continuance' may be defined after Price as follows : The existence of an entity is equivalent to the occurrence of a series of numerically different particulars whether qualitatively similar or dissimilar. Hume, however, (as rightly pointed out by Price) recognises only the monotonous and continuous series of sensuously qualified particulars without any qualitative difference ignoring the variegated series with qualitative difference. Price, therefore, comes to the conclusion that Hume's analysis of identity goes wrong at the very start. I think that Hume's analysis of identity does not go wrong in the beginning itself for the following reasons. His theory being destructive, he need not be committed to the 'Even theory of continuance' or any other theory for that matter. Moreover Hume makes a distinction between specific identity and numerical identity and he holds the view that there is only specific identity between perceptions based on similarity. This means that the existence of an entity is equivalent to the

occurrence of series of numerically different particulars if and only if they are qualitatively similar.

I am also not in agreement with Price's criticism that Hume ought to have maintained that the word 'identity' applies to a whole rather than an indivisible entity for the following reasons. Hume recognises only the existence of impressions which he considers to be indivisible entities. He regards an external object as a single perception. Though he sometimes holds the Berkeleyian view that an object is a collection of ideas, this view does not go against his basic assumption that impressions are the only entities. Moreover, he does not make a distinction between 'whole' and 'parts'. For him, impressions are the 'wholes' and they being distinct and distinguishable are capable of existing independently apart from the 'objects' which are nothing but masses of those impressions.

Jonathan Bennett also discusses the same problem but from a different angle in his book *Locke, Berkeley, Hume : Central Themes*<sup>6</sup>. He is of the opinion that though Hume locates a problem by posing the question, 'What honest work can the concept of identity do?', his explanation of the problem is far from being satisfactory. Hume, as we have already seen, is of the opinion that the concepts of unity and identity are mutually exclusive. Bennett thinks that a contingent identity statement and not an analytic identity statement such as 'x is identical with x' can involve these two concepts. In order to prove his point, he takes recourse to the Fregean<sup>7</sup> view that we can formulate an identity-statement which is both contingent and true by finding a pair of terms with different senses but the same reference. I agree with Bennett that Hume admits of just two alternatives namely (1) the two terms have the same sense (unity) and (2) the two terms have different reference (multiplicity). He does not admit of a third alternative where the two terms have different senses, but the same reference, because he thinks that the two alternatives are exhaustive. Hume takes 'idea' as the 'sense' as well as the 'object' whereas the 'vulgar' (with whom he sides) take 'idea' as the 'sense' and 'object' as the reference.

Hume locates a dilemma here which may be expressed as a complex constructive dilemma as follows ;

If the two terms have the same sense, there is unity and if

the two terms have different references, there is multiplicity. Either the two terms have the same sense or different references :

Either there is unity or multiplicity;

Now, is there any way of avoiding the norms of dilemma (falsehood and analyticity) ? Hume thinks that there is a way out. Consider what he says. 'We cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that the object is same with itself, unless we mean, that the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another. By this means we make a difference between the idea meant by the word object, and that meant by itself, without going the length of number, and at the same time without restraining ourselves to a strict and absolute unity. This means that the identical statement will not be of the form, 'x is identical with x' but of the form, 'x is identical with y', that is, a contingent identity statement. A contingent identity statement is of two types—namely synchronous identity-statements and serial-identity statements. Hume omits half the story by talking only about serial-identity statements. What is a serial identity statement ? Bennett takes the help of Quine to elucidate what a serial identity statement is. Quine opines that a serial-identity statement refers to distinct think-stages<sup>9</sup>. For example, when I say 'The child I fed today is the child I washed yesterday', I refer to two items, two child-stages. Therefore it is not strictly correct for me to say that one of them is the other. The correct statement would be that the statement does not refer to any child-stage at all, but it refers to an enduring child. I think that credit must be given to Hume for showing that no serial-identity statements can be strictly true.

According to Bennett, Hume needs to distinguish between 'my perception' and 'what I perceive'. He points out that only the former leads to falsehood. Here, I think that Bennett demands something which Hume would never think of conceding because he does not recognise any distinction between 'my perception' and 'what I perceive'.

Similarly, Bennett's accusation that Hume puts the cart before the horse by analysing objective-concept continuity through identity which itself is an objective concept, I find unjustified. I think that Hume is being reprimanded for a sin

which he has never committed. For Hume, continuity and identity are not objectivity-concepts. He connects identity with continuity because he wants to show how we are led to attribute identity to resembling, but variable and interrupted perceptions. I think that Hume regards identity of objects as a fiction because he regards continuity as a fiction. I would like to conclude that Hume's analysis of identity of objects is in accordance with his meaning-empiricism according to which meaning is a quasi sensory episode.

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#### NOTES

1. David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford University Press,
2. H. H. Price, 'The Permanent significance of Hume's Philosophy', P-11 (from *Philosophy*, Vol. 15, 1940)
3. David Hume, *Ibid.* p. 200.
4. H. H. Price; *Hume's Theory of the External World*, Oxford, 1940.
5. Jonathan Bennett, *Locke, Berkeley, Hume: Central Themes*, Oxford University Press, 1971.
6. G. Frege, 'On Sense and Reference', in P. Geach and M. Black (eds) Translation from *The Philosophical Writtings of Gottlob Frege*, Oxford., 1952.
7. David Hume, *Ibid.*, p. 201.
8. W. V. Quine, 'Identity, Ostension, and Hypostasis', in *From a Logical Point of view*, Cambridge, Mass, 1953 pp. 65-66.