

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

An attempt is made by D. C. Daniel to make out the instructiveness of Humean arguments as regards the problem of identity of objects in the *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 2, April 1985. He says in his paper, ignoring the defects of Hume's view, 'I would like to make an attempt to bring out the instructiveness of Humean arguments as regards the problem of identity of objects'.<sup>1</sup> But when one reads Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature*, it can be understood that it is not instructive account of identity; it is only a destructive one. In this article, I attempt to show the defects of Hume's understanding of the concept of identity.

Hume not only discusses the problem of identity of objects but also the problems of personal identity. So his discussion of the former cannot be isolated from the latter; for this reason the analysis in this article is related to both the aspects. Let us try to explain the problem of identity of objects in philosophical discussion. The concept of identity of objects assumes the possibility of identifying an object when referred to under one description, say as the object possessing the feature F, as the same object as is referred to under another description, say as the object possessing the feature G, and most important the possibility of identifying an object referred to as possessing the feature F at time  $t$  as the same object as the object referred to as possessing the feature G at the time  $t + n$ . For example, it

assumes the possibility of identifying an object existing through a period of time and as the same object although with changing characteristics. In other words, in terms of P. F. Strawson . . . . identifying (a particular) involves thinking that something is the same (particular): that the particular copy I see in the speaker's hand is the same particular as that to which he is referring; that the copy in his hand is the same particular as the copy I bought yesterday.<sup>3</sup> According to Bernard Williams "The standard form of an identity question is "Is this x the same x as that x which . . . . ?".<sup>4</sup> For Sydney Shoemaker: "As it is normally used in discussion of personal identity, and as I shall use here, the term "identity" implies persistence i.e., the existence of one and the same thing at different times.<sup>5</sup> The above formulations of the problem clearly clarify that the philosophical question which arises is that of the logical status of this assumption as to what constitutes the continuing identity of the object. In other words, in the more formal mode, what is the criterion which logically constitutes the identity of objects. David Wiggins describes it in the following way: "By a criterion of identity for the fs I mean something logically constitutive of the identity of fs, and potentially analytical of what it is to be an f. A criterion C only qualifies as the criterion for 'f' if the satisfaction of C logically implies the satisfaction of a transitive, symmetrical and reflexive relations, even though the empirical tests for the satisfaction of C need only preserve "de facto" this equivalence property of "f".<sup>6</sup> If Hume's view is an instructive one, he should provide a criterion for the identity of objects, which assumes the possibility of identifying an object existing through a period of time and as the same object although with changing characteristics. Now let us see how Daniel attempts to analyse Hume's view. following the simple explanation of the problem of identity: "Hume tries to explain the identity of objects with the aid of a single sentence, namely 'an object is the

same with itself'. "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 way 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." 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".<sup>7</sup>

The above view of Hume, as clearly grasped by Daniel, is mainly based on the doctrine of empiricism. On the grounds of this doctrine Hume denies the concept of identity, as a fiction or an invention. Daniel, too admits it: "I think that Hume regards identity of objects as a fiction because he regards continuity as a fiction."<sup>8</sup> If it is so, such a view cannot be an instructive one to solve the problem of identity.

Let us examine how Hume derives such a view. For him a necessary condition of something being one and the same thing is its being unchanged. In other words, the term identity is the same term as "sameness", and when taken strictly can only mean persistence without change. Hume upholding this meaning

says that we make a mistake identifying an object as the same through time in spite of its changes. He thinks of identity of objects as a paradoxical notion because it postulates an unchanged changing object. However, Hume says, what we call a thing is changing, but the change is small in proportion to the unchanging part of the mixture and occurs insensibly. As a result of this we are deceived into calling the thing the same in spite of its change. Hume says, "What will suffice to prove this hypothesis to the satisfaction of every fair enquirer, is to show how from daily experience and observation, that the objects, which are variable, or interrupted, and yet are supposed to continue the same, are such only as consist of a succession of parts connected together by resemblance, contiguity or causation. For as such a succession answers evidently to our notion of diversity, it can only by mistake we ascribe to it an identity: and as the relation of parts, which leads us into this mistake, is really nothing but a quality, which produces an association of ideas, and an easy transition of the imagination from one to another, it can only be from the resemblance, which this act of the mind bears to that, by which we contemplate one continued object, that the error arises."<sup>9</sup> Hume's view on identity of objects appears as an instructive one to those who share the view of the classical empiricist philosophers.

If we follow Hume's view, then we have to deny the causal connection of the objects. Daniel correctly regards that Hume's analysis of identity of objects is based on empiricism. "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."<sup>10</sup> If Hume's view is instructive according to

Daniel it implies that he too is following A. J. Ayer's view that "all significant sentences are strictly empirically verifiable."<sup>11</sup>

"I must explain that for the application of certain concepts it is necessary to structure the very experience in the same terms in which verification, as a theory of meaning, is formulated. Thus, I can only apply verification, in a world in which I can describe my observation, and I can only describe my observations if I can bring my experience within the concept of an observable objective world. The concept of my objective world is the concept of a world of spacial objects whose relationships in time is fully integrated by causal laws. So I cannot accept the empirical theory of meaning, nor need I deny the existence of real causal connection as the basis of it."<sup>12</sup>

According to the above account, an object is nothing but a succession of constantly changing sets of impressions and ideas. Hume comes to this conclusion on the basis of his famous doctrine that what is distinguishable is separable and what is separable exists separately in so far as experience consists of distinguishable perceptions or impressions. It can be nothing other than a succession of such essentially separable but contingently related states of mind. But this leaves him, as he acknowledges, in a paradoxical position; for he cannot explain what relation could hold between such states adequate to explain our logical inability to treat it as not a "real" connexion, such that I am logically unable to be in doubt whether an impression belongs to my biography or someone else's or no-one's. His suggested relations of contiguity, resemblance and causation, if taken as relations between actually separate "existence", then they patently fail to do this job. Hume did not touch upon this problem except to recognise it in his "appendix" to the *Treatise*. There he says, "In short there are two principles which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of

them viz., that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences and that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existence." <sup>13</sup>

For Hume a metaphysical substance is maintained to explain the continuity of object. He regards this postulation is a fiction or invention to solve the paradox in the notion of identity of objects: "In order to justify to ourselves this absurdity, we often feign some new and unintelligible principle that connects the objects together, and prevents their interruption or variation. Thus, we feign continued existence of the perceptions of our sense, to remove the interruption and run into the notion of a soul and self and substance to disguise the variation." <sup>14</sup>

Can we regard the above view of Hume instructive? Our answer is negative and he himself recognises in his "appendix" to the "Treatise" that the account of identity of objects as well as personal identity to which it commits him is an impossible and incoherent one. But he confesses that he has no alternative to replace it.

There is also a reason why we should not adopt it as an instructive one. If we seriously did so, language and thought become impossible. The only item conceivably capable of answering to Hume's demands for identity (continuous persistence unchanged) would be momentary sense-impressions, logically private objects; but no rules of identifications could apply to such objects. Wittgenstein's discussion of the possibility of a logically private language at least shows this; and no language could be based on references to them <sup>15</sup>

At the more superficial level of the effect of Hume's criterion on our thought of person, it could of course deprive us of all possibility of personal relations. For instance, "Can Sitā love Rāma? And if so, for how long?" Language, thought and

personal relations are based on the presupposition of the continuity of a person no less in the person of the thinker than in that of the person thought about

When we clarify Hume's view of personal identity, it makes clear the difficulties inherent in the problem of unity of individual consciousness from verification point of view. It also exposes the incoherence of accepting the natural candidate for criterion of strict identity; that "same object" should be "object perceived uninterruptedly as unvarying."

Let us summarize why we regard that Hume's view is destructive. He says that the continuity of an object is a fiction and one object is not sufficient to convey the idea of identity. It is our opinion that he is committed to such a destructive implication since he follows the empirical theory of meaning. This made him to convince himself that his explanation of identity of objects is an incoherent one.

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## NOTES

1. See S. C. Daniel : "The Problem of Identity of Objects in Hume's Philosophy", *Indian Philosophical Quarterly*, Vol. XII, No. 2, April 1985, p. 191.
2. David Hume: *A Treatise of Human Nature*, edited by L. A. Selby-Bigge, Oxford, University Press.
3. P F. Strawson : *Individuals*, Methuen, London 1971, pp. 31-32.
4. Bernard Williams : *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge University, p. 3.
5. Sydney Shoemaker : *Self Knowledge and Self Identity*, Cornell University Press, New York, 1963, p. 2.
6. David Wiggins : *Identity and Spatio-Temporal Continuity*, Basil, Blackwell, Oxford 1971, p. 43.
7. S. C. Daniel, *Ibid.* p. 191.
8. S. C. Daniel, *Ibid.* p. 196.
9. David Hume, *Ibid.* p. 255,
10. S. C. Daniel, *Ibid.* p. 196.
11. A. J. Ayer, *Language, Truth and Logic*, Penguin Books. 1971, ( see Preface to the second edition ).
12. Reginton Rajapaksa, "Buddhism as Religion and Philosophy" in *Religion*, Lancaster, 1986, 16, p. 52.
13. David Hume; *Ibid.* p. 636.
14. David Hume; *Ibid.* p. 254.
15. Ludwig Wittgenstein; *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford, 1933, see paragraphs 185-280.