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Hume's Idea of Self and Its Need for Others

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Hume's solitary reflection on the supposition of an external world and self in Book 1 of *A Treatise of Human Nature* seems to be maintained as the basis for the description of the social world in Books 2 and 3. However, the reflection in Book 1 needs compensation by examining interaction with others corresponding to the description in Book 2. First, following Hume's theory of perception in Book 1, the need for others to acquire the idea of self is considered. Then, investigating the descriptions of self in Book 2, the connection of the idea of self between Books 1 and 2 is reviewed. The compensation will make it easier to understand how the theory of perceptions and of the supposition of an external world and self in Book 1 constitutes the description of the mechanism of the social world in Book 2 (and consequently in Book 3).

1. The need for others to acquire the idea of self

Hume distinguishes between "personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves" (T 1.4.6.5; 253)¹. He treats the former in Book 1 "Of the Understanding." The latter is thought to be in Book 2 "Of the Passions." In Book 1 he suggests by introspection that when an external world of objects is supposed, an internal world is also to be supposed as distinguished from the external world (T 1.4.2.39; 207, 1.4.2.57; 218). The internal world is formed by impressions such as passions that "have a mutual connexion with and dependence on each other" (T 1.4.2.20; 195). This internal world can be called self, following his theory of the supposition of self (T 1.4.6, esp. 1.4.6.19-20; 261-2).

However, where there is not interaction with others, the ideas of an external world and self can be different from the ones we usually have, and the distinction between these ideas may even be vaguer than it usually is. Interaction with others must greatly contribute to forming the idea of self that is

similar to others, producing vivid impressions of sensation and feelings and forming the ideas of an external world where there are others and myself that has a body and internal world.

Regarding interaction, the action of others addressed to me and the awareness of receiving it seem to be especially important, because the action of others contains the idea of myself and it must cause the awareness of myself to me. Certainly, the action addressed to others and the reaction by others also produce the same effect, but the important thing seems the reaction addressed to me and the awareness of it as well.

If there were no action or reaction of others addressed to me but only the observation of (and the action on) others, it would be difficult to obtain the idea of self and to know the similarity between others and myself. An infant who is neglected in this way would not be able to have enough impressions and feelings to know the ideas of self, others and an external world, and would only become weak and die. In addition, only after knowing the similarity by interactions, could we just by observation recognize others as similar to us and sympathize with them, as we do when we watch a TV drama.

In the perceived world, others seem to be the ones who already recognize me as similar to them and provide such an idea of myself for me, with lively impressions and feelings, through their addressing action to me. In other words, their addresses seem to organize my internal and external world as is similar to theirs. To examine the social interaction in Book 2, it may be notable that the idea of self acquired in this way originally includes the similarity to others, having a body and mind, and occurring with the notion of an external world.

Furthermore, where there is not enough interaction with others as Hume tended to think in Book 1, the acquired idea of self probably becomes vague. For example, when I am just looking at an object, reading a story or thinking about something which is not directly related to myself, I may sometimes forget myself, even though the supposition of an external world and myself exists in the background, it is instantly remembered that here I am as a body and mind, and it can also be realized with some reflection that here I am as a Cartesian subject of perceiving and thinking of them.

These considerations overlap with Hume's writing on self that needs

others in Book 2,

I so far agree, that I own the mind to be insufficient, of itself, to its own entertainment, and that it naturally seeks after foreign objects which may produce a lively sensation, and agitate the spirits. On the appearance of such an object it awakes, as it were, from a dream: . . . And the whole man acquires a vigour, which he cannot command in his solitary and calm moments. Hence company is naturally so rejoicing, as presenting the liveliest of all objects, *viz.* a rational and thinking being like ourselves, who communicates to us all the actions of his mind; . . . Every lively idea is agreeable, but especially that of a passion, because such an idea becomes a kind of passion, and gives a more sensible agitation to the mind, than any other image or conception. (T 2.2.4.4; 352-3)

Others similar to ourselves convey their ideas and produce our impressions and feelings and the lively idea of ourselves that cannot be acquired without others. The compensation for the idea of self in Book 1 will help to understand the connection between the explanations of the idea of self in Books 1 and 2.

2. The connection of the idea of self between Books 1 and 2

Hume's theory of supposing the idea of self and an external world in Book 1 constitutes a basis for describing the social world in Book 2. However, when sympathy is argued, the idea of self is claimed "always" intimately present, which might seem to have been denied in Book 1. This claim is probably justified by considering that the idea of self is been strongly conscious of in front of others.

Hume begins Book 2 "Of the Passions" with the passions of pride and humility and deals with self as the object of these passions. He first writes,

This object is self, or that succession of related ideas and impressions, of which we have an intimate memory and consciousness. Here the view always fixes when we are actuated by either of these passions. (T 2.1.2.2; 277) (Def. 1)

The definition of self here as being a succession of related perceptions is identical with the ones as being a collection of related perceptions in Part 4 of Book

1 (T 1.4.2.39; 207, 1.4.6.4; 252, 1.4.6.19; 261).

Here self is also the idea viewed when these passions are excited. The "view" is often used to refer self as the object of the passions. For example, the passions direct their view to and look at ourselves (T 2.1.2.4; 278, 2.1.3.2; 280, 2.1.5.3; 286) or turn and direct our view and attention to ourselves (T 2.1.2.4; 278, 2.1.5.6; 287, 2.1.6.5; 292).

The following definition of self as the object of these passions is also the one of self as the succession:

self, or that individual person, of whose actions and sentiments each of us is intimately conscious. (T 2.1.5.3; 286) <Def. 2>

The similar definition is repeated when Hume proceeds to Part 2 of Book 2 and examines love and hatred compared to pride and humility:

self or that identical person, of whose thoughts, actions, and sensations we are intimately conscious. (T 2.2.1.2; 329) <Def. 3>

In these two definitions, what we are intimately conscious of is feelings, ideas and actions rather than the idea of self. "Actions" are interpreted not as the external ones of a body but as the internal ones of a mind that relate perceptions according to the main usage in Book 1 (ex. T 1.2.5.21; 61, 1.3.2.2; 73, 1.3.8.2; 98, 1.3.10.2; 118). Therefore it also seems that the internal feelings and actions of a mind are stressed for the constituents of self or a person.

The distinction between the external world and self is supposed clearly when the causes of these passions are treated. The subjects on which the causes are placed are qualities of the mind, the body and the objects related to us (T 2.1.2.5; 279). The qualities of the mind and the body are rephrased by "parts of ourselves" (T 2.1.5.2; 285) and "the qualities of our mind and body, that is *self*" (T 2.1.9.1; 303). The objects related to us are called "external objects" or "external advantages . . . in themselves widely distant from thought or a person" (*ibid.*). Besides, the mind is mentioned as "the imagination, judgment, memory or disposition" (T 2.1.2.5; 279). Here the actions are stressed for the mind. In addition, as the object of love and hatred, some other person is described as "some sensible being external to us" (T 2.2.1.2; 329). The distinction between external objects and others and self or a person is

seen from these elements.

The same is consequently true when Hume explains that pride and humility arise from the double relation of ideas and impressions, *i.e.*, the relation of the cause to self that is the object of the passions and the relation of the pleasant or painful sensation of the cause to the resembling sensation of each of the passions. So far, the idea of self is viewed on the understanding in Book 1.

However, the definition of self changes a little when sympathy is argued, and it may cause some interpretive difficulty. Sympathy becomes the issue because the opinions and sentiments of others are another important cause of pride and humility. To sympathize is to receive the sentiments and inclinations of others by "communication" or transmission (T 2.1.11.2; 316). The mechanism of sympathy is this: an affection of others is at first inferred and known from its expression or "external sign," and the inferred idea of the affection receives a vivacity from the lively idea of myself and becomes the passion itself since in general the liveliness of an idea is conveyed to related ideas and a relation of a great resemblance exists among human creatures (T 2.1.11.3-5; 317-8). Here Hume writes on the idea of self,

'Tis 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 'tis not possible to imagine, that any thing can in this particular go beyond it. Whatever object, therefore, is related to ourselves must be conceived with a like vivacity of conception (T 2.1.11.4; 317). <Def. 4>

He says that the idea of self is "always" present to us and the liveliest among perceptions. What does he mean by it, even though he has maintained that self is in fact a succession of related perceptions? He has even criticized "some philosophers, who imagine we are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our SELF; that we feel its existence and its continuance in existence; and are certain, beyond the evidence of a demonstration, both of its perfect identity and simplicity" (T 1.4.6.1; 251). Certainly, he has also maintained that we ascribe an identity to the succession in the imagination, but this claim does not necessarily mean that the idea of self is always present to us.

The same kind of description of self is provided in Book 2 Part 2 Section

4 "Of the love of relations," where Hume explains the love excited only by an easy sympathy that gives a lively idea:

The idea of ourselves is always intimately present to us, and conveys a sensible degree of vivacity to the idea of any other object, to which we are related. (T 2.2.4.7; 354) <Def. 5>

A description of self laid between Definitions 4 and 5 is notable, where Hume claims that love and hatred to others who are connected to me cause my pride and humility but not vice versa because the imagination passes easily from others to myself, *i. e.*, from obscure to lively, but with difficulty from myself to others, *i. e.*, from lively to obscure:

'Tis evident, that as we are at all times intimately conscious of ourselves, our sentiments and passions, their ideas must strike upon us with greater vivacity than the ideas of the sentiments and passions of any other person. (T 2.2.2.15; 339) <Def. 6>

"Ourselves" that we are at all times intimately conscious of is rephrased with "our sentiments and passions," and their ideas have great vivacity²). This description is similar to Definitions 1 to 3 of self in that what we are intimately conscious of is our sentiments and that they make self.

Of these six definitions, it should first be noticed that the always present and lively self is claimed when the relation to others and their sentiments are treated of: especially when sympathy is argued, the idea of self is emphasized to be always present and be the source of the liveliness conveyed to the ideas of the sentiments of others, as is seen in Definitions 4 and 5. This emphasis is probably made to support the claim that we feel the sentiments of others, the ideas of which we first only know, as we feel our own sentiments. However, in fact, the lively consciousness of the idea of self seems to come at all times from the lively consciousness of the perceptions that constitute the idea of self, as is seen in the other four definitions.

In addition, although it is said difficult for the imagination to pass from the idea of self to the ideas of others, Hume asserts it is easy in sympathy, when self is not the object of pride and humility any more, because the idea of self needs other perceptions to constitute it (T 2.2.2.17; 340-1). The idea of

self is a succession of perceptions in sympathy as well and may not always be present but is probably almost always and frequently present in front of others. It happens especially when we sympathize with the sentiments of others closely related to us and the sentiments toward us and then feel pride and humility.

From these examinations, the following points are concluded concerning the connection of the idea of self in Books 1 and 2 of the *Treatise*. These insights into the idea of self in the two books will also be applied to the theory of morals in Book 3.

1. The idea of self is supposed to have an identity and in fact is a succession of the related perceptions in Book 2 as well as is defined in Book 1.
2. The perceptions, especially sentiments, that constitute the idea of self, are always intimately been conscious of.
3. The idea of self that is a mind and body is formed with the ideas of an external world and others that are similar to self.
4. The imagination easily passes from the ideas related to self to the idea of self. The idea of self is viewed as an object of pride and humility.
5. We are almost always and lively conscious of the idea of self in front of others.
6. The sentiments of others are felt as lively as my own sentiments and the idea of self. They seem to be the prototypes and source of mine in most cases.
7. Hume distinguishes between "personal identity, as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves" (T 1.4.6.5; 253). The former is probably the idea of self understood with the ideas of an external world and others. The latter is the idea of self that we view as the object of pride and humility and are almost always intimately conscious of in front of others when we sympathize with the sentiments of others. It seems that in both cases the idea of self needs to be acquired thorough receiving others' addressing action to me, with their thoughts and feelings that is lively sympathized and felt.

Notes

- 1) References to Hume's *A Treatise of Human Nature* (hereafter "T") are to the edition of 2000, cited by book, part, section, and paragraph; then followed by a page reference to the edition of 1978.
- 2) The indication of "their ideas" is not exactly clear. If it means "the ideas of ourselves," no other example can be found in the text, but some of "the idea of ourselves." If it means "the ideas of our sentiments and passions," corresponding to "the ideas of the sentiments and passions of any other person," it is questioned why not just our sentiments and passions but their ideas are necessary, though the sentiments are our own and not the ones of others.

Works Cited

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