Natalie Beecher

PHL 206

28 March 2021

First Short Essay: Hume and Descartes

In Descartes’ *Second Meditation,* he contemplates the things that can surely be known to be true. In the previous Meditation, he imagined a that an all-powerful being was using its powers to deceive him, making all of his perceptions possibly false. He then concluded that while everything he perceives, including his own body, might be false, the one thing that must be true was that “I am, I exist.” He existed as a thinking mind, one that was capable of thinking, reasoning, and perceiving. He exists, he said, only as long as he can think. He puzzles over the idea that he could know the nature of things, such as physical objects, of which their existence can be doubted, better than what he knows to be true: his own identity, his mind. So he considers the idea of “extended objects” using the example of wax. Whatever changeable qualities wax has, whether it be taste or smell, texture or shape, Descartes observes that even as these qualities change in wax, we are still able to identify it as the same object. When a chunk of wax melts over the fire, he notes, we do not then say it is a different object altogether. We sense an “extended” quality of the wax that stays the same even as its shape, smell, and color change. These objects, like wax, are “perceived by the mind alone” (21). He writes that the identity of this wax was not produced by sensory perceptions alone: “The perception I have of it is a case not of vision or touch or imagination…but of mental scrutiny; and this can be imperfect and confused, as it was before, or clear and distinct as it is now, depending on how carefully I concentrate on what the wax consists in” (21). Through this act of concentrating on the wax more closely, of “dinstinguish[ing] the wax from its outward forms,” as he did, he noticed that this type of observation was one only a thinking mind, as opposed to an animal mind, could do; this “perception now requires a human mind” (22). By perceiving ever more clearly and distinctly, he continued, he came to know himself more distinctly. “This is because every consideration whatsoever which contributes to my perception of the wax, or of any other body, cannot but establish even more effectively the nature of my own mind” (22). Just as wax retains the same, unchanging identity even as its qualities change, so too do our minds, which retain the same identity as we grow and change. Unlike Hume, which I will discuss later, Descartes believed that with every perception and sensation, with deeper understanding of the distinctness of those perceptions, we can come to know our minds more distinctly; perceptions deepen our understanding of ourselves rather than distract from it.

Hume, as I mentioned, believed that perceptions forever distract from our attempts to know our Selves. He argued that all of our ideas stem from our perceptions, from sensory input. But the idea of a Self cannot stem from one single perception; there is nothing that we can point to as the cause, the origin, of our identity. Hume argues directly against Descartes’ idea of the Self. While Descartes believed that there is something which our mind (alone) perceives that links the extended qualities of a body together and forms its identity, Hume argued that such an invariable, uninterrupted identity cannot exist. “If any impression gives rise to the idea of self, that impression must continue invariable the same, through the whole course of our lives; since self is supposed to exist after that manner. But there is no impression constant and invariable” (1). If there is no one impression that can be named responsible for the formation of identities, then it must be in the relations of ideas that identity is found. When we try to think about the idea of a self, we end up thinking in matters of what Hume calls “resemblance” and “causation” (he discards contiguity for irrelevance in this situation). When we try to perceive the Self, we are constantly distracted by other impressions that resemble those we are trying to distinguish. We cannot look in the mirror without constantly relating that what we see to other experiences, memories, and present emotions; no impressions of the Self can be pure, uncontaminated by this resemblance. Hume’s idea of causation, when thinking about the mind, is to “consider [the mind] as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are linked together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other” (5). Our impressions continually give rise to their correspondent ideas, which give rise to other impressions, and so forth. This picture of the mind forms an idea of one that is ever changing, ever shifting in ideas while retaining the same identity. This, Hume said, relates to memory. If our identities are formed because of our current and past impressions, which continually influence each other, our identities must be dependent on our memory. But even memory changes over time as we forget past thoughts and events and experience new ones. If a man forgets about something he said or did years ago, “will be affirm…that the present self is not the same person with the self of that time; and by that means overturn all the most established notions of personal identity?” (6).

Descartes did not seem to consider this idea, that, for example, a man who has forgotten about the rude, drunken words he uttered the year before, might claim that he was no longer that man, that his identity has changed because he’d lost that memory. Hume suggests that personal identity is discovered, not produced, by memory, and we can therefore not extend that identity past the bounds of a person’s memory. Because we cannot extend it past memory, it is impossible, for Hume, to argue that there is a simple, unchanging, identity beyond our impressions. But, I feel, Descartes also almost anticipated this objection. He mentioned that the limitations to our knowledge of other bodies, including other people, exists because of the limitation of our perceptions; he mentioned the difference between knowledge and judgement in the example of viewing men on the street, who may actually be automatons. We may never be able to know beyond *judgments of the mind* what constitutes other bodies, and he doesn’t claim that we may know things perfectly. Descartes does not claim that we may know things perfectly, even after gaining a more distinct idea of them, but we may come closer to fully perceiving the true identity of a body by trying to understand them through perceptions of the mind. As to Hume’s idea of memory, in that our personal identity is ever changing based on our stored memories, I would argue that it is possible for our minds to be changed even by memories we cannot remember: what of repressed memories, which we cannot call forth by will? I could not claim that the trauma that became repressed memories does not influence someone’s personal identity just because they cannot recall the event. This is where I think Descartes’ idea of perceptions is fascinating. He said that every perception, every observation we make and meditate on brings us closer to understanding our own mind; our perceptions and individual understandings of them continually influence and reveal our own identity, but do not make us entirely different people than we were months or years ago. So someone may experience something that they later forget or repress, but the influence of that event may still shape the *types* of perceptions they make and contemplate. I do not agree with Hume in saying that the idea of Self is merely verbal, grammatical, useless; that our idea of identity is wholly dependent on the relations of ideas. While it is possible to never perceive ourselves perfectly and distinctly in every moment, I don’t believe that the fact that our minds are ever changing prohibits the existence of a Self.

Works Cited

Descartes, R. (n.d.). Second Meditation. In *Meditations* (pp. 1-6).

Hume, D. (n.d.). On Personal Identity. In *Hume's Treatise of Human Nature* (pp. 16-22). London: Dent.