mind; no more true of an extended compounded substance than of a simple and unextended one. In both cases the \*metaphysical arguments for the immortality of the soul are equally inconclusive; and in both cases the \*moral arguments and those derived from the analogy of Nature are equally strong and convincing. If my philosophy doesn't add to the arguments for religion, I have at least the satisfaction of thinking that it doesn't take anything from them either. Everything remains precisely as before.

6: Personal identity

Some philosophers believe this:

We are every moment intimately conscious of what we call our self; we feel its existence and its continuing to exist, and are certain—more even than any demonstration could make us—both of its perfect identity and of its simplicity. The strongest sensations and most violent emotions, instead of distracting us from this view of our self, only focus it all the more intensely, making us think about how these sensations and emotions affect our self by bringing it pain or pleasure. To offer further evidence of the existence of one's self would make it less evident, not more, because no fact we could use as evidence is as intimately present to our consciousness as is the existence of our self. If we doubt the latter, we can't be certain of anything.

Unfortunately, all these forthright assertions are in conflict with the very experience that is supposed to support them. We don't so much as have an idea of self of the kind that is here described. From what impression could this idea be derived? This question can't be answered without obvious contradiction and absurdity; yet it must be answered if the idea of self is to qualify as clear and intelligible. Every real idea must arise from some one impression. But self or person is not any one impression, but is rather that to which all our many impressions and ideas are supposed to be related. If the idea of self came from an impression, it would have to be an impression that remained invariably the same throughout our lives, because the self is supposed to exist in that way. But no impression is constant and invariable. Pain and pleasure, grief and joy, passions and sensations follow one other and never all exist at the same time. So it can't be from any of these impressions or from any other that the idea of self is derived. So there is no such idea.

Furthermore, if we retain this hypothesis about the self, what are we to say about all our particular perceptions? They are all different, distinguishable, and separable from one other—they can be separately thought about, and can exist separately—with no need for anything to support their existence. In what way do they belong to self? How are they connected with it? For my part, when I look inward at what I call myself, I always stumble on some particular perception of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure, or the like. I never catch myself without a perception, and never observe anything but the perception.
When I am without perceptions for a while, as in sound sleep, for that period I am not aware of myself and can truly be said not to exist. If all my perceptions were removed by death, and I could not think, feel, see, love or hate after my body had decayed, I would be entirely annihilated—I cannot see that anything more would be needed to turn me into nothing. If anyone seriously and thoughtfully claims to have a different notion of himself, I can’t reason with him any longer. I have to admit that he may be right about himself, as I am about myself. He may perceive something simple and continued that he calls himself, though I am certain there is no such thing in me.

But setting aside metaphysicians of this kind, I am willing to affirm of the rest of mankind that each of us is nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions that follow each other enormously quickly and are in a perpetual flux and movement. Our eyes can’t turn in their sockets without varying our perceptions; our thought is even more variable than our sight; and all our other senses and faculties contribute to this change in our perceptions, with no one of them remaining unaltered for a moment. The mind is a kind of stage on which many perceptions successively make their appearance: they pass back and forth, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of positions and situations. Strictly speaking, there is no *simplicity in the mind at one time and no *identity through different times, no matter what natural inclination we may have to imagine that simplicity and identity. *That is to say: It is not strictly true that *when a blue colour is seen and a whistling sound heard at the same time, one single unified mind has both these perceptions; nor is it strictly true that *the mind that has a certain perception at one time is the very same mind that has a perception at another time. *The ‘stage’ comparison must not mislead us. What constitutes the mind is just the successive perceptions; we haven’t the faintest conception of the place where these scenes are represented or of the materials of which it is composed.

What, then, makes us so inclined to ascribe an identity to these successive perceptions, and to suppose that we have an invariable and uninterrupted existence through the whole course of our lives? To answer this question we must distinguish what we think and imagine about personal identity from the role of personal identity in our emotions and desires. The former is our present subject. To explain it perfectly we must dig fairly deep: first we must account for the identity that we attribute to plants and animals, because there is a great analogy between that and the identity of a self or person.

We have a clear idea of an object that remains invariable and uninterrupted while time supposedly passes. We call this the idea of identity or sameness. We have also a clear idea of many different objects existing successively in a close relation to one another; and this, properly understood, is just as good an example of diversity as it would be if the objects were not related to one another in any way. *As the sand runs in the hour-glass, this grain is distinct from that one that falls a tenth of a second later and a micromillimetre behind; they are diverse from one another, which is simply to say that they are two grains, not one; and the fact that they are closely related to one another (in space, in time, and in being alike) makes no difference to that. They are as distinct from one another—they are as clearly two—as the Taj Mahal and the Grand Canyon. But though these two ideas of identity and a sequence of related objects are perfectly distinct from one another and even contrary, yet in our everyday thinking they are often confused with one another, treated as though they were the same. *I now explain what leads us into that confusion. *Here are two mental activities:
(1) thinking about a sequence of related objects, and
(2) thinking about one uninterrupted and invariable object.

Although these are distinct, and involve different activities of the imagination, they feel the same. The activity in (1) doesn’t require much more effort than the activity in (2): in (1) the relation between the objects helps the mind to move easily from one to the next, making its mental journey as smooth as if it were contemplating one continued object as in (2). This resemblance between these two kinds of thought generates the confusion in which we mistakenly substitute the notion of (2) identity for that of (1) related objects. When contemplating a sequence of related objects, at one moment we think of it as (1) variable or interrupted, which it is, yet the very next moment we wrongly think of it as (2) a single, identical, unchanging and uninterrupted thing. That completes the explanation. The resemblance that I have mentioned between the two acts of the mind gives us such a strong tendency to make this mistake that we make it without being aware of what we are doing; and though we repeatedly correct ourselves and return to a more accurate and philosophical way of thinking, we can’t keep this up for long, and we fall back once more into the mistake. Our only way out of this oscillation between truth and error is to give in to the error and boldly assert that these different related objects are really the same, even though they are interrupted and variable. To justify this absurdity to ourselves, we often feign some new and unintelligible thing that connects the objects together and prevents them from being interrupted and variable. The perceptions of our senses are intermittent—there are gaps between them—but we disguise this by feigning that they exist continuously; and they vary, but we disguise this by bringing in the notion of a soul or self or substance which stays the same under all the variation. Even in contexts where we don’t indulge in such fictions, we are so strongly inclined to imagine something unknown and mysterious connecting the parts, other than the relations between them; and this is what I think happens when we ascribe identity to plants. When even this kind of fiction-making doesn’t take place, we still feel impelled to confuse these ideas with one another, though we can’t give a satisfactory account of what we are doing or find anything invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity.

Thus the controversy about identity is not a merely verbal dispute. For when we attribute identity in an improper sense to variable or interrupted objects, we are not just using words wrongly but are engaging in a fiction, a false thought, either of something invariable and uninterrupted or of something mysterious and inexplicable. To convince a fair-minded person that this is so, we need only to show him through his own daily experience that when variable or interrupted objects are supposed to continue the same, they really consist only in a sequence of parts, connected together by resemblance, contiguity [= ‘nextness’], or causation. Such a sequence obviously fits our notion of diversity, so it can only be by mistake that we attribute an identity to it; and this mistake must arise from the fact that when the imagination moves from one of the related parts to the next, this act of the mind resembles the act in which we contemplate one continued object. What I mainly have to prove, then, is that whenever we ascribe identity to something that we do not observe to be unchanging and uninterrupted, what we are really talking about is not a single object, but rather a sequence of related objects.

To get started on this, suppose we have in front of us a mass of matter whose parts are contiguous and connected;
clearly we have to attribute a perfect identity to this mass so long as it continues uninterruptedly to contain the very same parts, even if those parts move around within it. Now suppose that some very small or inconspicuous part is added to the mass or removed from it. Strictly speaking, it is no longer the same mass of matter; but we—not being accustomed to think so accurately—don’t hesitate to say that a mass of matter is still ‘the same’ if it changes only in such a trivial way. Our thought moves from the object before the change to the object after it so smoothly and easily that we are hardly aware that there is any movement; and this tempts us to think that it is nothing but a continued survey of the same object.

One aspect of this phenomenon is well worth noticing. Although a turnover in any large part of a mass of matter destroys the identity of the whole, that is, makes us unwilling to say that it continues to be the same thing, what we count as large in this context depends not on the actual size of the part but rather on how big a proportion it is of the whole. We would count a planet as still ‘the same’ if it acquired or lost a mountain, but the change of a few inches could destroy the identity of some bodies. The only way to explain this is by supposing that objects interrupt the continuity of the mind’s actions not according to their real size but according to their proportion to each other; and therefore, since this interruption makes an object cease to appear ‘the same’, it must be the uninterrupted movement of the thought that constitutes the imperfect identity, that is, that leads us to say that something is ‘the same’ when, strictly speaking, it is not the same.

This is confirmed by another phenomenon. Although a change in any considerable part of a body destroys its identity, if the change is produced gradually and imperceptibly we are less apt to see it as destroying the identity. The reason for this must be that the mind, in following the successive changes of the body, slides easily along from surveying its condition at one moment to surveying it at another, and is never aware of any interruption in its actions.

However careful we are to introduce changes gradually and to make each a small proportion of the whole, when eventually they add up to a considerable change we hesitate to attribute identity to such different objects. But we have a device through which we can induce the imagination to go one step further in attributing identity where really there is none—namely, relating the parts to one another through some common end or purpose. A ship of which a considerable part has been changed by frequent repairs is still considered ‘the same’ even if the materials of which it is composed have come to be quite different. Through all the variations of the parts, they still serve the same common purpose; and that makes it easy for the imagination to move from the ship before the repairs to the ship after.

This happens even more strikingly when we see the parts as being causally related to one another in everything they do, in ways that reflect their common end. This is not the case with ships, but it is the case with all animals and vegetables: not only are the parts taken to have some over-all purpose, but also they depend on and are connected with one another in ways that further that purpose. The effect of this relation is that, although in a very few years both plants and animals go through a total change, with their form, size and substance being entirely altered, yet we still attribute identity to them. An oak that grows from a small plant to a large tree is still the same oak, we say, though there is not one particle of matter or shape of its parts that is the same. An infant becomes a man, and is sometimes fat, sometimes thin, without any change in his identity.

We should also consider two further noteworthy facts. The
first is that though we can usually distinguish quite exactly between numerical and specific identity, yet sometimes we mix them up and use one in place of the other in our thinking and reasoning. [Numerical identity is real identity, or being the very same thing. It is called ‘numerical’ because it affects counting: if \( x \) is not numerically identical with \( y \), then \( x \) and \( y \) are two. By ‘specific identity’ Hume means similarity, qualitative likeness, being of the same species, sort, or kind.] Thus, a man who hears a noise that is frequently interrupted and renewed says it is still ‘the same noise’, though clearly the sounds have only a specific identity, that is, a resemblance, and there is nothing numerically the same but the cause that produced them. Similarly, when an old brick church fell to ruin, we may say that the parish rebuilt ‘the same church’ out of sandstone and in a modern architectural style. Here neither the form nor the materials are the same; the buildings have nothing in common except their relation to the inhabitants of the parish; and yet this alone is enough to make us call them ‘the same’. It is relevant that in these cases -of the noises and the churches- the first object is in a manner annihilated before the second comes into existence. That protects us from being presented at any one time with the idea of difference and multiplicity: that is, we are not in a position to pick out both noises (or both churches) at the same time, and have the thought ‘This is one and that is another’; and that increases our willingness to call them ‘the same’.

Secondly, although in general we don’t attribute identity across a sequence of related objects unless the change of parts is gradual and only partial, with objects that are by nature changing and inconstant we will say they are ‘the same’ even if the changes are quite sudden. For example, the nature of a river consists in the motion and change of parts, so that there is a total turnover of these in less than twenty-four hours, but this does not stop the river from being ‘the same’ for centuries. What is natural and essential to a thing is expected, and what is expected makes less impression and appears less significant than what is unusual and extraordinary. A big change of an expected kind looks smaller to the imagination than the most trivial unexpected alteration; and by making less of a break in the continuity of the thought it has less influence in destroying the supposition of identity.

I now proceed to explain the nature of personal identity, which has become such a great issue in philosophy. The line of reasoning that has so successfully explained the identity of plants and animals, of ships and houses, and of all changing complex things—natural and artificial—must be applied to personal identity too. The identity that we ascribe to the mind of man is fictitious; it is like the identity we ascribe to plants and animals. So it can’t have a different origin from the latter, but must come from a similar operation of the imagination on similar objects.

That argument strikes me as perfectly conclusive, but if you aren’t convinced by it you should consider the following even tighter and more direct argument. It is obvious that the identity we attribute to the human mind, however perfect we may imagine it to be, cannot make many different perceptions become one by making them lose the distinctness and difference that are essential to them. Every distinct perception that enters into the mind’s make-up is a distinct existence, and is different and distinguishable and separable from every other perception (whether occurring at the same time or at other times). Yet we suppose the whole sequence of perceptions to be united by identity—we say that the members of the sequence are all perceptions of a single person—which naturally raises a question about this relation of identity. Is it something that really binds together our various perceptions themselves, or does it only
associate the ideas of them in the imagination? In other words, when we speak about the identity of a person, do we observe some real bond among his perceptions, or do we merely feel a bond among the ideas we form of those perceptions? The question is easy to answer, if we remember what I have already proved, namely that the understanding never observes any real connection among objects, and that even the cause-effect relation, when strictly examined, comes down to a customary association of ideas. For that clearly implies that identity doesn't really belong to these different perceptions, holding them together, but is merely a quality that we attribute to them because of how the ideas of them are united in the imagination when we think about them. Now, the only qualities that can unite ideas in the imagination are the three I have mentioned. They are the uniting principles in the world of ideas; without them every distinct object is separable by the mind and can be separately thought about, and seems to be disconnected from every other object, not merely from ones that are very dissimilar or distant. So identity must depend on some of the three relations of resemblance, contiguity, and causation. Now, the very essence of these relations consists in their making ideas follow one another easily; so our notions of personal identity must proceed entirely from the smooth and uninterrupted movement of thought along a sequence of connected ideas, in the way I have explained.

The only remaining question is: Which of the three relations produce this uninterrupted movement of our thought when we consider the successively existing perceptions that we take to constitute a mind or thinking person? Obviously contiguity has little or nothing to do with it; so we must attend to resemblance and causation.

Let us take resemblance first. If someone always remembers a large proportion of his past perceptions, this will contribute greatly to the holding of a certain relation within the sequence of his perceptions, varied as they may be. For memory is just a faculty by which we raise up images of past perceptions; and an image of something must resemble it. So each memory involves a perception that resembles some past perception the person has had; and the frequent occurrence of these resembling-pairs of-perceptions in the chain of thought makes it easier for the imagination to move from one link in the chain to another, making the whole sequence seem like the continuation of a single object. In this way, therefore, memory doesn't merely show the identity but also helps to create it, by bringing it about that many of the perceptions resemble one another. The account given in this paragraph applies equally to one's sense of one's own identity and to one's thoughts about the identity of others.

Causation also has a role. The true idea of the human mind is the idea of a system of different perceptions that are linked by the cause-effect relation, through which they mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to corresponding ideas, which in their turn produce other impressions. One thought chases another and draws after it a third by which it is expelled in its turn. In this respect the soul is very like a republic or commonwealth, in which the members are united by the links that connect rulers with subjects; these members cause others to come into existence by begetting or giving birth to them, and these in their turn keep the same republic continuously in existence throughout all the unceasing changes of its parts. And just as the same individual republic may change not only its members but also its laws and constitution, so also the same person can vary his character and disposition as well as his impressions and ideas. Whatever changes he undergoes, his various parts are still connected by causation. Our emotions contribute
to our identity just as our impressions and ideas do, by making some of our perceptions influence others that occur at very different times. This is what happens when we have a present concern for our past or future pains or pleasures.

Memory should be regarded as the source of personal identity, mainly because without it we wouldn’t know of the existence of this lengthy and continuous sequence of perceptions. If we had no memory, we would never have any notion of causation or, consequently, of the chain of causes and effects that constitute our self or person. Once we have acquired this notion of causation from our memory, we can extend the same chain of causes—and consequently the identity of our persons—beyond our memory, stretching it out to include times, circumstances and actions that we have entirely forgotten but which we suppose on general grounds to have existed. How many of our past actions do we actually remember? Who can tell me, for instance, what he thought and did on the 1st of January 1715, the 11th of March 1719 and the 3rd of August 1733? Or will he overturn all the most established notions of personal identity by saying that because he has forgotten the incidents of those days his present self is not the same person as the self of that time? Looked at from this angle, memory can be seen not so much to create personal identity as to reveal it, by showing us the relation of cause and effect among our different perceptions. Those who contend that memory alone produces our personal identity ought to explain how we can in this way extend our identity beyond our memory.

The whole of this doctrine leads us to the very important conclusion that all the precise, subtle questions about personal identity can never be settled, and should be seen as verbal difficulties rather than philosophical ones. Identity depends on the relations of ideas; and these relations produce identity by means of that easy movement of thought that they give rise to. But the relations in question are matters of degree, and so is the easiness of the mental movement that depends on them; so we have no correct standard by which to settle when they acquire or lose their entitlement to the name ‘identity’. Just because the basis of our identity judgments consists in matters of degree, there can be borderline cases—just as there are borderlines for baldness, tallness and so on. All the disputes about the identity of connected objects are merely verbal, except in so far as the relation of parts gives rise to some fiction—some imaginary source of union—such as I have described.

What I have said about the origin and the uncertainty of our notion of the identity of the human mind can also be applied—with little or no change—to our notion of simplicity, that is, the notion of a thing’s not having parts. An object whose different coexistent parts are closely related strikes the mind in much the same way as one that is perfectly simple and indivisible, and the thought of it doesn’t require a much greater mental stretch. Because contemplating it is like contemplating something simple, we regard as though it were simple, and we invent a principle of union as the support of this simplicity and as the centre of all the different parts and qualities of the object.

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[After Book I of the Treatise of Human Nature had been published, Hume had some afterthoughts that were published in an Appendix to Book III. Here is the afterthought that he asks us to insert at this point.]

**Start of the Appendix Passage**

I had hoped that however deficient my theory of the intellectual world might be, it would at least be free from those contradictions and absurdities that seem to infect every explanation that human reason can give of the material
world. But reconsidering more carefully the section on personal identity I find myself involved in such a labyrinth that I don’t know how to correct my former opinions, nor do I know how to make them consistent. If this is not a good general reason for scepticism, it is at least a sufficient one (as if I didn’t already have plenty) for me to be cautious and modest in all my conclusions. I shall present the arguments on both sides, starting with those that led me to deny the strict and proper identity and simplicity of a self or thinking being. I offer seven of these, each pretty much independent of the others.

(1) When we talk of self or substance we must associate ideas with these terms, otherwise they would be meaningless. Every idea is derived from previous impressions; and we have no impression of self or substance as something simple and individual. We have, therefore, no idea of them in that sense.

(2) Whatever is distinct is distinguishable, and whatever is distinguishable is separable by the thought or imagination. All perceptions are distinct. They are, therefore, distinguishable, and separable, and may be thought of as separately existent, and may exist separately, without any contradiction or absurdity.

When I view this table and that chimney, nothing is present to me but particular perceptions that are of the same kind as all other perceptions. This is the doctrine of philosophers. But this table and that chimney can and do exist separately. This is the doctrine of the common man, and it implies no contradiction. So there is no contradiction in extending the same doctrine to all perceptions—that is, the doctrine that they can exist separately. The next paragraph gives an argument for this.

The following reasoning seems satisfactory on the whole. All ideas are borrowed from previous perceptions. So our ideas of objects are derived from that source. Therefore any proposition that is intelligible and consistent with regard to objects must be equally so when applied to perceptions. But it is intelligible and consistent to say that objects exist independently, without having to inhere in any common simple substance. So it can’t be absurd to say the same thing about perceptions. We are therefore not entitled to insist that there must be some self or substance in which our perceptions exist.

(3) When I look in on myself, I can never perceive this self without some one or more perceptions; nor can I ever perceive anything but the perceptions. It is a complex of these perceptions, therefore, that constitutes the self.

(4) We can conceive a thinking being to have as few perceptions as we like—even to be reduced to the level (below that of an oyster) of having only one perception, such as that of thirst or hunger. In considering such a mind, do you conceive anything more than merely that one perception? Have you any notion of self or substance? If not, the addition of other perceptions can never give you that notion.

(5) The annihilation that some people suppose to follow on death, and which entirely destroys this self, is nothing but an extinction of all particular perceptions—love and hatred, pain and pleasure, thought and sensation. So these must be the same as the self, since the one cannot survive the other.

(6) Is self the same as substance? If it is, then there can be no question of the same self remaining when there is a change of substance. If on the other hand self and substance are distinct, what is the difference between them? For my part, I have no notion of either when they are conceived as distinct from particular perceptions.

(7) Philosophers are beginning to be reconciled to the principle that we have no idea of external substance distinct from the ideas of particular qualities. This should pave the way for a similar principle regarding the mind, namely
that we have no notion of it distinct from the particular perceptions.

All of this seems clear and true. But having started my account with our particular perceptions all loose and separate, when I proceed to explain the principle of connection that binds them together, making us attribute to them a real simplicity and identity, I come to realize that my account is very defective, and that I wouldn’t have accepted it if it weren’t for the seeming power of the foregoing arguments.

[Hume now re-states his own theory of personal identity, in a manner that is favourable to it. His subsequent worries and doubts start to surface only at the end of this paragraph.] If perceptions are distinct existences, they form a whole only by being connected together. But the human understanding can never discover connections among distinct existences; we only feel a connection in our mind when our thought is compelled to pass from one object to another. It follows, then, that personal identity is merely felt by our thought: this happens when our thought reflects on the sequence of past perceptions that compose a mind, and feels its the ideas of them to be inter-connected and to follow on from one another in a natural way. Extraordinary though it is, this conclusion need not surprise us. Most philosophers today seem inclined to think that personal identity arises from consciousness, and consciousness is nothing but a thought or perception directed inwards towards oneself. To that extent, this present philosophy of mine looks promising. [Now comes the trouble.] But all my hopes vanish when I come to explain the principles, that unite our successive perceptions in our thought or consciousness. I cannot discover any satisfactory theory about this.

In short, there are two principles that I cannot render consistent, nor can I give either of them up: (1) all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences, and (2) the mind never perceives any real connection among distinct existences. If our perceptions either inhered in something simple and individual, or if the mind perceived some real connection among them, there would be no difficulty. For my part, I must plead the privilege of a sceptic and confess that this problem is too hard for my understanding. I don’t say outright that it is absolutely insoluble. Perhaps someone else—or even myself after further reflection—will discover some hypothesis that will reconcile those contradictions.

·NOW BACK TO SECTION 6·

Thus I have finished my examination of the various systems of philosophy, both of the intellectual and the moral world; and, in my miscellaneous way of reasoning I have been led into several topics that will either illustrate and confirm some of what I have been saying or prepare the way for what is to come. It is now time to return to a closer examination of our subject, and to proceed in the accurate anatomy of human nature, having fully explained the nature of our judgment and understanding.