Strawson and Self: Reconciling Reid and Hume
Allison Preyde
Trent University

Abstract
This paper attempts to reconcile David Hume’s theory of personal identity with Thomas Reid’s theory by considering Galen Strawson’s notion of episodic versus diachronic identities, and comparing Hume and Reid to these notions respectively. By proposing a spectrum of identity on which Hume’s and Reid’s theories are parts of the whole, one becomes more able to account for human variation and change over time. Such reconciliation is important because it acknowledges the differences in, and complexities of, human experience, which in turn allows for a more accurate account of personal identity as a whole.

In this paper I argue first that David Hume’s personal identity theory reflects Galen Strawson’s notion of an episodic identity, and that Thomas Reid’s theory reflects Strawson’s notion of a diachronic identity. Second, I argue that neither theory alone can provide an accurate account of human personal identity, given the variation both between individuals and within an individual over a lifetime. I begin by briefly discussing the assumptions I make for the purposes of this paper, as well as some linguistic limitations with regard to the word “self.” I then explain Strawson’s conception of personal identity as varied, and outline his theory of episodic versus diachronic identities. I go on to compare Hume’s theory of identity-as-perceptions to Strawson’s theory, and suggest that Hume’s theory corresponds with Strawson’s notion of the episodic self. Next, I compare Reid’s theory of identity-as-perceiver to Strawson’s theory, and suggest that Reid’s theory is similar to Strawson’s notion of the diachronic self. Finally, I suggest that the primary problem for both Hume and Reid is that their theories do not account for human variation. I use the similarities drawn between Strawson’s theory and the theories of Hume and Reid to consider a way in which this problem might be addressed, and to begin to attempt to reconcile these seemingly opposing conceptions of personal identity.

First, some caveats. I recognize that these theories are not perfect reflections of each other; there are differences between Strawson’s theory and the theories of Hume and Reid, and limitations in all. But in this paper I am primarily interested in the similarities between them and the ways in which Hume’s and Reid’s seemingly opposed conceptions of identity might be reconciled. Secondly, I am assuming a distinction between personal identity (or “self”) and the physical human body. Strawson says that there is “a distinction between one’s experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as a human being taken as a whole, and one’s experience of oneself when one is considering oneself principally as an inner mental entity or self.”¹ For the purposes of this paper I am using personal identity to mean this inner mental entity or self. I am limited by language to refer to a notion of “self” even when I am discussing theories that do not see any such entity as existing inherently within human beings or existing continually as such over time. This use of the word in those instances is not meant to imply any underlying coherent being, but is simply a linguistic constraint.

In his paper “Against Narrativity,” Strawson makes a distinction between two types of self-experience, which I interpret as being two points on an identity spectrum. These are different ways of experiencing one’s self and one’s life. He calls these episodic and diachronic, and suggests that people tend to be either one or the other but can also be in between and can change over the course of their lives.² Diachronic self-experience, according to Strawson, is the kind in which one “naturally figures oneself...as something that was there in the past and will be there in the future.”³ In other words,

² Ibid., 431.
³ Ibid., 430.
diachronic persons experience a conception of self as one that continues over their lifetimes. This means that one may change, but diachronic persons interpret these changes as happening to a core self that endures over the course of their lives. For example, I could say that I am not the same person that I was when I was fourteen. I have different values, different goals, different ways of seeing and interacting with the world, but I do not think that the “me” that existed in 2005 is an essentially different self than the “me” that exists today. Similarly, I assume that I will have different goals, ends and projects when I am fifty, but I see my self as something consistent that will exist throughout my life, despite the changes it makes. Contrariwise, in episodic self-experience, one “does not figure oneself… as something that was there in the past and will be there in the future.”

In other words, an episodic person would not experience her self in the way that I do, but would see the self that she was at fourteen as being essentially different from her self at fifty. This is not to say that she does not recognize a consistency in her physical body or her memories, but rather that she experiences her self as existing only in the present moment, and does not recognize past or future selves as having an important essential, consistent component throughout her lifetime.5

Hume says that the self is “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”6 He describes the mind as a theater that allows different perceptions to “make their appearance; pass, repass, glide away, and mingle in an infinite variety of postures,”7 but goes on to clarify that it is the succession of perceptions themselves, and not the notion of a theater or showroom, that constitutes the mind.8 This could be interpreted to mean that Hume sees no internal notion of a self at all, and indeed Hume does say that “identity is nothing really belonging to these different perceptions… but is merely a quality which we attribute to them.”9 However, he also says that “our propensity to this mistake [of identity] is so great…that we fall into it before we are aware…and though we incessantly correct ourselves by reflection…we cannot… take off this bias from the imagination.”10 If it is the case that human beings cannot help but assume a notion of “self” despite there being no empirical evidence of such, then perhaps this is a linguistic difference rather than a metaphysical one with regard to different meanings of the word “self.” If we assume these bundles of perceptions to be the self, such that the “self” changes with changing perceptions, then I think it is justified to suggest that Hume does propose a theory of “self,” though perhaps one different from what is normally meant by the word. Thus, I take Hume to argue for a conception of self that changes with changing perceptions, such that the self that perceived abc when it was fourteen is not the same self that perceives xyz when it is fifty. For this reason, I think that Hume’s notion of personal identity as a bundle of present perceptions is sufficiently similar to Strawson’s description of an episodic individual who does not experience his present self as having existed in the past or as something that will exist in the future. I return to this point later.

Thomas Reid describes personal identity as “something which thinks, and deliberates, and resolves, and acts, and suffers….It is not thought…not action…not feeling, [but] something that thinks, and acts, and suffers.”11 Moreover, “continued uninterrupted existence is…necessarily implied in identity” since “that which has ceased to exist cannot be the same with that which afterwards begins to exist.”12 He

---

4 Ibid.
5 Ibid., 434.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
9 Ibid., 167.
10 Ibid., 164.
12 Ibid., 242.
argues that memory is proof of this identity, such that “if [something] was done by me, I must have existed at that time, and continued to exist from that time to the present.”13 This is not to suggest that remembering something makes it the case that there was a self that perceived that something, but rather this is an argument that memory provides proof of (and is not cause of) an enduring self.14 He says that “thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment…but that self or I to which they belong, is permanent.”15 This means that Reid considers the self to be something more essential than the changing perceptions, something that exists continuously throughout a lifetime. For this reason, I suggest that Reid’s theory of personal identity as an enduring, perceiving self is sufficiently similar to Strawson’s notion of the diachronic person as one who experiences the self as existing both in the past and into the future.

Both Hume and Reid seem to assume that the respective ways in which they experience their selves are reflective of all human experience. To be fair, Hume does say that “if anyone…thinks he has a different notion of himself…I can allow [that] he may be in the right as well as I, and that…[he may] perceive something simple and continued, which he calls himself; though I am certain there is no such principle in me.”16 However, I would infer from the way he proceeds in his essay that he does not think such a person actually exists, because he only considers his own experiences when creating his theory of self. Similarly, Reid seems to assume that others necessarily see themselves as continuous, insofar as they remember their lives; such memory acts as proof that a self must have existed to have experienced those things.17 In fact, this notion of self as necessarily uninterrupted does not disqualify Strawson’s conception of the episodic person. To the extent that they consider past or future selves to be different from their present selves, they do not see the “self” as being interrupted at all.

If one assumes that both Reid and Hume were capable and intelligent, and both were being honest and accurate with regard to the way they experience their selves, then I think a plausible way to explain their differing theories is to say that these two men varied in their self-experience. Strawson says that “it may be that the basic episodic disposition is less common in human beings than the basic diachronic disposition, but many factors may induce variations in individuals.”18 Indeed, it may be that “one’s exact position in episodic/diachronic…state-space may vary significantly over time according to what one is doing or thinking about, one’s state of health…[and perhaps] markedly with age.”19 By taking “elements of their own experience that are existentially fundamental for them…[and assuming] it must also be fundamental for everyone else,”20 Reid and Hume are missing elements of the whole human experience that they, as only parts of the whole, have not personally experienced. If we accept it to be the case that different individuals experience their selves differently, and that indeed a single individual may experience her self differently over time, then I think it is reasonable to argue that a single theory of personal identity, such as Reid’s or Hume’s, is insufficient to cover the complexities of human experience.

It is for this reason that I have argued that their theories are sufficiently similar to particular aspects of Strawson’s personal identity theory. By considering Reid and Hume as differing ends of a spectrum of human experience, as Strawson has done with his episodic/diachronic distinction, one is able to address the problem that a theory with no allowance for variation causes, namely that it is not representative of all human experiences. Hume and Reid seem to present opposing theories of personal identity, insofar as

13 Ibid., 243. Emphasis added.
14 Ibid., 244.
15 Ibid., 243.
16 Hume, Treatise, 163.
17 Reid, Essays, 243.
19 Ibid.
20 Ibid., 439.
Hume sees the self as consisting of perceptions and Reid sees the self as the thing which perceives. I suggest that these notions are not inherently oppositional, but are rather two points on a spectrum of human experience that consists of many degrees and types of self-experience, upon which an individual may move about throughout the course of his life.

I have argued that Hume’s theory of self-as-perceptions is sufficiently similar to Strawson’s notion of the episodic self, and that Reid’s theory of self-as-perceiver is sufficiently similar to Strawson’s diachronic self. I went on to argue that neither Hume’s nor Reid’s theory alone was sufficient to account for variations in human experience, and that a combination of their theories might more accurately encompass this. By showing that their theories are respectively sufficiently similar to differing aspects of Strawson’s theory, I suggested that their theories could be reconciled by considering them as two separate points on a spectrum of human experience. Such reconciliation could fix the main problem in that their theories, independent of each other, cannot account for human variation. Combining these theories allows for individuals to conceive of their selves in a more robust way, because they will then have more options to articulate their differing experiences as normal. People can thus explore ways of understanding their self-experiences that a single theory (which normalizes a single type of self-experience) cannot provide. Moreover, I think that different types of people would be able to locate their experiences of identity, and thus such a combined theory would provide a more accurate account of embodied human experience as a whole.

REFERENCES