

**Do you agree with the philosopher David Hume that 'I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never observe anything but the perception' (6/109)?  
Examine Hume's account of the nature of the self, showing the main features that distinguish it from Cartesian dualism.**

David Hume's skeptical approach to the 'self' questions our beloved 'I' and therefore, his vanishing of a substantial 'I', must be addressed and examined with care, not necessarily to defend our 'I', but because such an alternative forces us to reconsider what we have taken for granted. It pushes us to scrutinize aspects of our beliefs in a manner that absolves them of their simplicity and beckons us on a journey into their complexity.

To investigate David Hume's account of the nature of the self, the claim, "I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never observe anything but the perception", shall be placed in the context of Hume's skepticism and compared and contrasted to Descartes' substantial 'I'. Secondly, the claim itself shall be examined in detail. Thirdly, exploring objections to Hume's conclusions will bring to light an appreciation of the challenge Hume posited.

The Scottish Philosopher David Hume critically approached established truths and reified facts. As an empiricist, he posited that truths were not certainties, but required justification. More importantly, he did not think it possible for us to understand anything beyond our experience. He claimed that it was not possible to justify beliefs in the continuity of physical objects and their ability to exist independent of our experience. In fact, he questioned the role of reason and replaced it with custom, claiming that custom alone allows us to link past and future, not a faculty or ability independent of our human experience.

Hume's theory of the self adheres to his empiricist approach. Accordingly, a self cannot be deduced from introspection. All one can be aware of are thoughts and feelings (conscious states). The subject is never actually perceived and therefore, cannot be deduced from conscious states. Our sense of 'I' is constructed from thoughts, feelings, and other parts held together by mutual mental attraction, a diverse bundle of interconnected perceptions over time. In other words, Hume paints a picture of a non-substantial, but distinct mind that cannot arrive at first principles or total causes.

On the other hand, Descartes believed in a substantial and distinct mind. The father of modern philosophy believed in a self that existed *a priori* to experience. Descartes was a rationalist, who after claiming that he had proved the existence of a substantial 'I', went on to deduce facts and certainties from it. Furthermore, to Descartes, reason alone, independent of experience, can determine truths. The Cartesian self is a mental substance that cannot be doubted. Mind is a simple unity, indivisible. His dream argument in the First Meditation questioned the certainty of knowledge we acquire through the senses. It is not always easy to distinguish between a dream and waking life. At times dreams are eerily similar to waking life. Thus the senses are deceptive.

The gulf between the two thinkers is vast, but neither of their arguments can be passed over without thought. Nonetheless, the comparison brings to light Hume's radical approach, especially the vanishing of the substantial 'self' and our inability to know beyond experience, and the challenge it postulated.

More specifically, Hume states his challenge to the illusory substantial 'I' as, 'I never catch myself at any time without a perception, and never observe anything but the perception'. The 'I' in the quote is constructed inductively through perception. Perceptions represent all mental content and are comprised of impressions and ideas. Impressions are perceptions of objects that are present and include sensations, desires, passions and emotions. They are also referred to as original impressions due to the fact that their causes go beyond experience. Ideas are perceptions of objects that are not present or directly perceived. Consequently, impressions are clearer, sharper and brighter as they are directly experienced by our senses. Ideas are copies of impressions.

The words 'at any time' imply a role for memory and the ability to recollect. 'Presence at a given time' or connectedness on its own conveys that each new thought requires a new mind, but our ability to recollect, allows for a self over an extended period of time and a sense of personal identity.

Therefore, Hume sees the self as a collection of mercurial individual thoughts, sensations, and feelings which is not contained or a part of anything outside of itself, as a collection (referred to as bundle theory). The contents of the mind at any given time are connected to one another, but to varying degrees.

But what distinguishes one collection or bundle from another? Peter Carruthers in 'Introducing Persons' states that, to Hume, bundles are brought together as a result of resemblances and causal relations amongst conscious states, but Carruthers questions whether this is possible when considering conscious states 'at a time'. For example, there is no resemblance or causal relationship between a pain someone is experiencing and what he/she is watching on TV. Relying on higher-order states of consciousness such as being aware of a pain and what is on TV simultaneously, not individually, does not solve the problem as not all conscious states are brought together in such a manner. For example, according to Carruthers, it is not always possible to have simultaneous awareness of, for example, both my train of thought and the sequence of music I am listening to. I may hear a specific note while I am thinking, but I may not be aware of their simultaneousness. Considering just the capability of simultaneous awareness could not solve the problem either. More specifically, "It may be that I was incapable of being aware that my experience of the crescendo was simultaneous with my thought about the distinction between strong and weak dualism, because had I tried to have such an awareness, I could not have thought that thought." Carruthers, Peter, *Introducing Persons*, page 56)

Secondly, since minds are bundles of conscious states, the particularity of a conscious state must come prior to a particular mind. Carruthers argues that this way of thinking is flawed as it is not possible to first discern that two distinct, but similar experiences exist and then attempt to solve the puzzle of whether those experiences belong to two minds or one. Such an issue can only be answered by first establishing a distinct mind and then whether there are two things doing the experiencing or one.

The result is not necessarily a Cartesian self, but it could be as Kant stated in the Introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, "...but though all our knowledge begins with experience, it does not follow that it all arises out of experience." The faculties of understanding interact with the external world to form a self. Thus the self need not be a Cartesian 'I' nor a bundle.

In conclusion, David Hume attacked our notion of a substantial 'I', an 'I' we regularly take for granted, and replaced it with a 'bundle' that may cease to exist once we can no longer experience. In the process, he questioned the Cartesian 'I', and our ability to know for certain that we exist, purely through reason. Attacks on conventional thinking are necessary for progress and thus those who took up Hume's challenge inquired into the 'I' itself, its substantiality and its relationship to the objective world in a manner that allowed for an appreciation of the complexity of the self.