

A.1-3.Q6 - Hume Contra Self

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The philosopher Hume remarked that when he looked into himself, he never succeeded in catching sight of his 'self', but only of particular thoughts, feelings and perceptions. Is that a valid argument against the idea of a soul?

Any philosophical essay not backed by extensive sourced material must inevitably fall back on opinion over authority at some point. It is with this in mind that we ask you to kindly consider the following essay despite its lack of authoritative sourcing or extensive researching.

We begin by retracing Hume's argument and inquiring after the self. If it truly exists we should need to gather some irrefutable evidence for it. Outer experience, being by nature experience of things not my 'self', can only provide indirect evidence of it. Since we are looking for direct evidence we must turn inwards. However, upon looking inwards we only see particular thoughts - a reminder about an errand I have to run followed by a feeling of hunger. Where in these particular thoughts could anything like a coherent self - an entity that unites, explains, and survives all my particular experiences - be found? My inner experiences alone contain no trace or mark that would lead me to believe in the existence of such an entity over and above any other possible explanation. I can examine particular thoughts all day and never learn about their origin.

But in this line of argument Hume has committed a subtle mistake. What almost escapes notice is that these inner experiences themselves require something to experience them. Something has obviously experienced these particulars, though it has not necessarily also produced them. This mind's eye that watches and sees the particular thoughts, feelings, or perceptions is the one thing underlying all these experiences. The precondition for "catching sight of" inner experience is the eye that can see them. Hume has seemingly missed this fact and confused the experiences themselves with the experiencer.

Despite this mistake Hume's argument has still launched a successful attack against certain strong notions of the soul. If by soul we mean the entity that both experiences the inner and outer worlds *and* produces the inner world then we must halt at the latter proposition. Since the experiences of the inner world contain no information about their origin we are not entitled to assume they are produced by the very same entity that experiences them. We may just as well assume their origin in any other object or in multiple other objects. Thus we can only say that the soul is the experiencer, it is not even necessarily entitled to be the source of the thoughts it observes. Therefore, this is an even stronger skepticism than that of Descartes.

In conclusion, Hume has failed to argue against the idea of the soul but has been successful in severely limiting such an idea. We might say that he has reduced Descartes "I

think, therefore I am” down to “*I observe...*”. He has made either refutation or confirmation of any stronger notion impossible, and therefore succeeded in inducing aporia.