

DISCUSSION

SELF-CONCERN FROM PRIESTLEY TO HAZLITT

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Toward the beginning of the nineteenth century, William Hazlitt, in *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action*, proposed a theory of personal identity and self-concern that is remarkably similar to Derek Parfit's recent revisionist account.¹ Hazlitt even asked in regard to possible resurrection fission scenarios, how he could decide which of the multiple copies of himself or of his continued consciousness that were created by God were *really* himself or a proper object of his egoistic self-concern. Hazlitt concluded that belief in personal identity must be an acquired imaginary conception and that since in reality each of us is no more related to his or her future self than to the future self of any other person none of us is 'naturally' self-interested.²

How did Hazlitt, at the beginning of the nineteenth century, come upon ideas considered radical in the last third of the twentieth century? Probably he was aware of earlier eighteenth-century discussions of fission examples involving the resurrection.³ However, for the most part, these had been

¹ William Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action and some Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius* (1805; reprinted, Gainesville FL, 1969); Derek Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford, 1984). See, Raymond Martin and John Barresi 'Hazlitt on the future of the self', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56 (1995) No. 3, 463–81, for a discussion of Hazlitt's views in this work and their relevance for recent discussions in the philosophy and psychology of personal identity and self. See also, Raymond Martin, *Self-Concern: An Experiential Approach to What Matters in Survival* (Cambridge, 1998); John Barresi, 'Extending self-consciousness into the future', in Chris Moore and Karen Lemmon (eds), *The Self in Time: Developmental Perspectives* (Hillsdale, NJ, 2001); Raymond Martin, John Barresi and Alessandro Giovannelli, 'Fission examples in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century personal identity debate', *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, 7 (1998) No. 3: 323–48; Raymond Martin and John Barresi, *Naturalization of the Soul: Self and Personal in the Eighteenth Century* (London, 2000), and 'Personal identity & what matters in survival: an historical overview', in Raymond Martin and John Barresi (eds), *Personal Identity* (Oxford, 2002).

² Hazlitt, *ibid.*, 132–41.

³ Hazlitt must have been aware of fission examples through the debate between Joseph Priestley and Richard Price, where on several occasions, as one of his own objections to Priestley's account of the resurrection, Price uses Samuel Clarke's fission argument involving the resurrection (Samuel Clarke, *The Works of Samuel Clarke, Vols. I–IV* (1738; reprinted, New York, 1968), vol. 4, 720–913; Joseph Priestley and Richard Price, *A Free Discussion of the Doctrines of Materialism, and Philosophical Necessity, In a Correspondence Between Dr. Price and Dr. Priestley* (1778; reprinted, Millwood, NY, 1977), 56–9; 77–8; Martin, Barresi,

used, by Samuel Clarke and others, not to question personal identity, but to support a traditional immaterial substance view of self against Locke's relational view based on consciousness. What could have led Hazlitt to turn the argument on its head, using it to reject the metaphysical notion of personal identity altogether? And what motivated him to connect the issue of personal identity to his novel view of the basis for self-interest?

One might suspect that Hume's discussion in the *Treatise*, in which he implicitly rejected the notion of personal identity, may have set the problem for Hazlitt. After all, it is known that Hume's views on imagination, as developed by Adam Smith and then later and especially by Abraham Tucker, profoundly influenced Hazlitt.⁴ However, with respect to issues involving personal identity and self-concern, the main influence on Hazlitt seems to have come not from Hume, but from an independent discussion among Unitarian materialists that developed toward the end of the century.⁵ In this discussion, two original thinkers on the topic, Joseph Priestley and Thomas Cooper, as well as Thomas Belsham, Hazlitt's teacher of divinity at Hackney, were of particular importance.

Priestley and Cooper were Christian materialists, opposed to the notion of an immaterial, immortal soul as a carrier of personal identity. They thus found it necessary to provide a relational account of the resurrection that would conform to Christian dogma. At the time, it was generally thought that the material body alone could not suffice as the basis for maintaining personal identity, even in this life. So Priestley and Cooper had a special problem to face in dealing with the resurrection. To deal with it, both of them shifted away from personal identity to an alternative conception of what matters primarily in survival, based on the connectedness of successively related – though not identical – selves. Although these selves are assumed to be connected by a kind of recollective consciousness of previous acts of the living person, neither Priestley nor Cooper supposed that such a connection necessarily implied or constituted identity between the resurrected self and the living person. Rather, all that such a connection provided was a continuity and connectedness of what are now sometimes called continuer selves:

³ (*continued*) and Giovannelli, *op. cit.*; Martin and Barresi, *op. cit.*, 2000). Priestley was one of Hazlitt's teachers at Hackney College, and Price, who was no longer alive when Hazlitt went there, had created the college. In a brief biographical essay on Priestley, Hazlitt mentions this debate and Priestley's 'artful evasion of difficulties' raised by Price (see P. P. Howe (ed.), *The Complete Works of William Hazlitt, 22 vols* (New York, 1967), vol. 20, p. 237).

⁴ According to Hazlitt the imagination of future selves plays a crucial role in human action, but is indifferent to who's self is being imagined and, hence, is *naturally* disinterested. See David Bromwich, *Hazlitt: The Mind of a Critic* (Oxford, 1983), 24–57, for influences on Hazlitt's theory of imagination.

⁵ Hazlitt may not have been acquainted with Hume's *Treatise* at the time that he first formulated his theory, in 1793–4. In describing his first meeting of Coleridge, in 1798, Hazlitt mentioned that he had just been reading the *Treatise*, we suspect for the first time (William Hazlitt, 'My First Acquaintance with Poets', in *Winterslow: Essays and Characters Written There*, London, 1902, 1–23, p. 10).

that is, selves that maintain psychological continuity and, possibly, causal connectedness, but are not identical with any of their predecessors.

When Priestley proposed this sort of shift away from personal identity as a solution to the problem posed by the resurrection, he proposed it not as his own theory, but to satisfy those who thought that the resurrection poses an insuperable problem for Christian materialists.⁶ Thomas Cooper went further. He held the much more radical view that since personal identity is not maintained at all, *even in successive stages of earthly life*, it does not matter that personal identity is not maintained all the way through to the resurrection. In his view, what matters is not identity, but the causal consequences of associative connections from each self to temporally successive selves.⁷

Cooper – lawyer, scientist, philosopher, and political radical – was born in Westminster, England, and educated at Oxford University, where he failed to earn a degree. He was a friend and associate of Priestley, and a member with him of the Manchester Society. Cooper's most important philosophical work, his *Tracts, Ethical, Theological and Political* (1789), includes essays on moral obligation, materialism, and Unitarianism as well as a highly original chapter on personal identity.⁸ In 1794, along with Priestley, he emigrated to America in the hope of finding political freedom. And, like Priestley, he settled in Northumberland, Pennsylvania, where he practiced law and medicine. After an adventurous political career, which included a stay in prison, he eventually accepted a position at South Carolina College (now the University of South Carolina), where initially he taught in the social sciences. Subsequently he became president of the college.

In his chapter on identity, Cooper first surveys the important eighteenth-century literature on personal identity, including the views of John Locke, Gottfried W. Leibniz, Isaac Watts, Samuel Clarke and Anthony Collins, Joseph Butler, Joseph Priestley, Richard Price, and Charles Bonnet.⁹ At the

⁶ Joseph Priestley, *Disquisitions Relating to Matter and Spirit and the Doctrine of Philosophical Necessity Illustrated* (1777; reprinted, New York, 1976), 166–7; Priestley and Price, op. cit. We have provided a fuller account of Priestley's views on identity and what matters in survival in Martin and Barresi, op. cit., 2000. See also, Martin, Barresi, and Giovannelli, op. cit.

⁷ See Udo Thiel, *Lockes Theorie der personalen Identität* (Bonn, 1983), 196–7, 'Locke and Eighteenth-Century Materialist Conceptions of Personal Identity', in *The Locke Newsletter*, vol. 29 (1998): 59–83, Thiel, 'Thomas Cooper', in John V. Price and John W. Yolton (eds), *Dictionary of 18th Century British Philosophers* (Bristol, 1999), 232–3, and Thiel (ed.), *Philosophical Writings of Thomas Cooper, vol. 1.* (Bristol, 2000).

⁸ Thomas Cooper, *Tracts, Ethical, Theological and Political, v. 1* (London, 1789). See also, Thiel (ed.) *ibid.*, vol. 1.

⁹ Cooper does not mention Hume in this context, and explicitly wrote that only one other account of personal identity – a letter on the topic – has come to his attention. In his other works, he did mention Hume's *Essays*, but not the *Treatise*. Because of the similarity between Cooper's views and Hume's, Thiel (op. cit., 1998; p. 72) suggests that Cooper may have left out Hume's account on purpose in order to avoid 'theological controversy'. We believe that this would have been out of character for Cooper and that it is more likely that he had not come across a copy of the very rare first edition of the *Treatise*, so had not read the account of personal identity found only in that work.

heart of his own view are two claims: first, since the notion that an object that changes over time is identical is in a strict philosophical sense incoherent, personal identity over time is impossible; and second, that the non-existence of personal identity is not a problem for us either in this life or the next because, in the language of our own times, personal identity is not what matters primarily in survival.

In developing this view, Cooper, in a manner similar to Butler, Hume, and Reid, made a distinction between identity in a 'common and popular' sense, and identity 'strictly and philosophically speaking'.¹⁰ According to the popular sense, all that is required for identity is that the compared objects are sufficiently similar that there is little or no perceptual difference between them. In this popular sense, he claimed, there is no problem with personal identity. People are able to distinguish their own bodies from the bodies of others, and to do this over time, and that is all that it takes to establish identity. He went on to provide a developmental account of how the similarity between our successive perceptions of our own bodies over time and their dissimilarity to our perceptions of the bodies of others, provides the basis for first discovering self and other as separate entities and then subsequently continuing to distinguish between them.¹¹

For identity in a philosophical sense, Cooper said, more is required. He defined identity in this stricter sense as 'the continued existence of any being unaltered in substance or in properties'.¹² He went on to argue that such a definition is never satisfied, either for minerals, vegetables, animals, or persons. His review of developments in chemistry suggested to him that the properties and substance of all material objects are constantly in a process of change. And, he claimed, the situation for living beings is no better, even if life or organization is used as the primary criterion. He considered and rejected the possibility that although the matter out of which a person is composed is constantly replaced, there is a form or structure that remains constant. For, life as an attribute is renewed constantly out of new material, and the organization of all living beings is constantly in flux, along with the organs and matter out of which that organization is constituted. On his view, as the organs change, so must the structure of the whole. So there is no property or form that remains the same.¹³

The case for personal identity, Cooper claimed, is no better. He said that there is no evidence that people have immaterial souls.¹⁴ He also held that mental activity is a function of brain and body, and that there is ample evidence that all of the matter out of which brains and bodies are composed is constantly being replaced, with nothing remaining constant and, as noted,

¹⁰ Cooper, *Tracts*, v. I, 355–6.

¹¹ Cooper, *ibid.*, 365–8.

¹² Cooper, *ibid.*, 308.

¹³ Cooper, *ibid.*, On minerals, 388ff.; on living organization, 382–8.

¹⁴ Cooper, *ibid.*, devotes most of his *Essay on Materialism* to argue against the notion of an immaterial soul, mainly on empirical grounds.

with the structure and functioning of the whole living system changing in consequence of these changes in its parts. He rejected as too hypothetical the individually unique and unchangeable material ‘stamina’ theory to which Watts and Priestley subscribed. Of Charles Bonnet’s related ‘pre-existent germ’ theory of personal identity, activated by insemination of the embryo, Cooper argued, first, that there is no evidence that these germs exist and, second, that even were they to exist they would induce new properties as well as growth and change in the embryo, which argue against any notion of maintaining identity. Furthermore these germs, ‘while cooped up within the mutable mansion’ of the body must undergo ‘perpetual alteration’ along with the rest of the body, once again transforming possible identity into mere similarity.¹⁵

With regard to consciousness and the Lockean notion of personal identity, Cooper accepted Anthony Collins’ idea of sequentially connected but distinct consciousnesses, constituted out of brain activity, as the empirical basis for recollective consciousness; but he rejected the idea that such connections could possibly constitute personal identity. Indeed, his response to the fission examples generated by Clarke was to indicate that fission examples have no force against Collins’ view, which already rejects identity in a strict sense of ‘same’ consciousness. Instead, Cooper wondered why Collins did not just give up the notion of personal identity altogether and go with a theory of the connectedness, or continuation, of similar but non-identical selves. Cooper claimed that this is what follows from Collins’ view. Indeed, it is this very view of serially connected but distinct selves or persons that Cooper adopted for himself.¹⁶

In sum, in Cooper’s view, no one lasts for long – not even for a few moments, let alone year to year. Rather, there is a succession of *similar* persons, each of whom is *causally* dependent for his or her existence on predecessors in the series. Because persons are similar in this way to previous persons, and causally connected to them, people have supposed mistakenly that personal identity has been preserved over past changes and will be preserved over future ones. Cooper concluded that personal identity is an illusion, or at best merely a pragmatically useful notion with no adequate support in the nature of things.

What, Cooper asked, of the objection that on his view ‘the man at the resurrection will, upon this system, be not the same with, but merely similar to the former’? Cooper answered that ‘similarity is all that a reasonable being, deciding according to evidence, can actually predicate in any case of the existence of a living human creature, at any two moments of that existence’. He pointed out that ‘we never conceive this to be of the least consequence during our life, nor do we ever suppose that where the particles of which our bodies are to be composed are similar, that identity

¹⁵ Cooper, *ibid.*, 431–3.

¹⁶ Cooper, *ibid.*, 338–40; 434.

is of the least consequence'. So, he concluded, 'Identity then, is not necessary to the phenomena of future existence', even at the resurrection.¹⁷

In reply to Butler's point, that on the supposition that personal identity 'consists in successive acts of consciousness, the man of to-day need take no care about the man of to-morrow', Cooper argued, first, that there 'is sufficient reason to care' about 'the man of to-morrow, though not in all points the same with' the man of to-day, because he 'depends for his existence on the man of to-day' and, second, that 'the man of to-morrow possessing a reminiscence of the actions of the man of to-day, and knowing that those actions will be referred to him, both by himself and others, they cannot be indifferent to the man of to-day who looks forward to the properties of the man of to-morrow'.¹⁸ In these remarks, Cooper showed that he was sensitive to the issues of what practices people will endorse in connection with personal persistence and how people anticipate 'their own' futures. In the third part of his reply to Butler, Cooper added that 'the approximation to identity, i.e., the high degree of similarity between the two men, is sufficient to make the one care about the other: and in fact they do so'.¹⁹

So far as considerations of morality are concerned, Cooper replied 'that a good man knowing that a future being, whose existence depends upon his, will therefore be punished or rewarded as the actions of the present man (whose habits and associations will be propagated) deserve, will have a sufficient motive to do right and abstain from wrong'. And, so far as both morality and prudence are concerned:

That the man of a twelvemonth hence, or some more indefinitely long period, depending for his existence or properties on the man of to-day, is nearer to the latter considerably, with respect to the interests the latter has in him, than the children of this man of to-day, and yet the children of a person, though at the utmost only half his, furnish very strong motives to care and anxiety concerning them, and a guard upon a man's present conduct, in consideration of the effect it will have upon their future happiness.²⁰

So, in Cooper's view, self-concern is secure.

These views of Cooper were subsequently discussed by Thomas Belsham, who would teach theology to William Hazlitt at Hackney College. In Belsham's *Elements of the Philosophy of Mind*, which was based on his lectures at Hackney, he first correctly summarized Cooper's view, and then wrote that if

Cooper's hypothesis were generally admitted and acted upon, it would be very injurious to the cause of virtue: for few would be encouraged to virtue, or

¹⁷ Cooper, *ibid.*, 456–8.

¹⁸ Cooper, *ibid.*, 462–3.

¹⁹ Cooper, *ibid.*, 463.

²⁰ Cooper, *ibid.*, 463–4.

deterred from vice, if they had no interest in the reward or punishment consequent upon their moral conduct.

So, Belsham was not convinced by Cooper's replies to Butler's objection about self-concern. Nevertheless, Belsham reassured his readers, that

men are so much the creatures of habit, that the most extravagant opinions seldom produce any considerable change in their conduct. And in the present case, the conviction of permanent identity, *however acquired*, is so firmly fixed in the mind that it is impossible to root it out.²¹

No doubt Belsham was right that few humans will root out from their minds commitment to the notion of personal identity. But Hazlitt – who, as Belsham's student, was surely aware of Belsham's discussion of Cooper – decided to give it a go anyway. Before considering Hazlitt, however, we want to point out another aspect of Cooper's thought that seems to be in tension with the replies he made to Butler's objection involving self-concern. Hazlitt may have recognized this tension, and it may have provided another basis for the novelties in his own view.

In Cooper's *Essay on Moral Obligation*, he distinguished between the *causes* of moral behaviour and the *justification* of moral obligation. He explicitly recognized this as a distinction between 'is' and 'ought'.²² He also suggested that moral behaviour can be explained simply enough on association principles, whereas moral obligation cannot. He then went on to argue that the only possible justification for moral activity must be our own long-term personal self-interest, since the ultimate justification for any action is to avoid pain and to obtain happiness for oneself. Further, he claimed that belief in an afterlife is also necessary to virtue, since prudence must always dominate over public virtue, if there is no anticipation of an ultimate reward for virtuous activity. Thus, for instance, he claimed that atheists are not in a position to justify virtuous activity because they do not believe in an afterlife, where virtue will reap ultimate rewards.

In this essay of Cooper's, which was written before his essay on identity, it is clear that he does not take into account the theory of identity that he would later develop. For, according to that theory, there can be no prudent activity involving one's own personal future because there is no personal future, only selves in the future who are similar to the present self or depend on it for their existence. Thus, on Cooper's account of moral obligation only a person's present pain or immediate happiness can ever really justify an action.

It may be that Belsham recognized this inconsistency in Cooper, since he discussed both Cooper's theory of identity and his theory of moral

²¹ Thomas Belsham, *Elements of the Philosophy of Mind, and of Moral Philosophy* (London, 1801), 162–3.

²² Cooper, *Tracts*, vol. 1, 1–122.

obligation. Belsham, like Cooper, thought that the Christian belief in an afterlife is the only ultimate justification for virtue. But, unlike Cooper, Belsham optimistically suggested that there may be some material ‘germ’ that is the basis of identity not only during this life but also at the resurrection, thus providing an ultimate warrant for virtue in this life.

Although we cannot be certain how Hazlitt came to his own theory, we conclude with what we believe is a reasonable reconstruction of Hazlitt’s thoughts, based on evidence presented in this article and elsewhere.²³ As Hazlitt stated in the *Essay*, he reached his great metaphysical insight shortly after reading, in d’Holbach’s *System of Nature*, the speech that the atheist makes to God at the resurrection. In that speech the atheist claims not to have believed in God or in the resurrection, but also claims to have led a virtuous life.²⁴ This discussion may have led Hazlitt to reflect once again on the puzzle of how one could justify being virtuous, or altruistic, when it might be opposed to long-term self-interest involving an afterlife.

When Hazlitt started to imagine the resurrection, presumably he thought that personal identity would somehow be maintained. If identity were maintained, then, clearly one *ought* to act in a manner that would result in one’s own ultimate reward. According to association theorists like Hartley and his followers, including Priestley, Cooper and Belsham, this pursuit of final reward is still congruent with general benevolence or altruism. But, Hazlitt asked himself, what if I were forced to choose between altruism and my own ultimate reward? Why *must* I choose prudence over altruism? Suppose, he wondered, I could save twenty other persons by voluntarily consenting to suffer for them. Why, he asked, should I not do a generous thing, and never trouble myself about what might be the consequence to myself the Lord knows when?²⁵

It is at this point that Hazlitt may have reconsidered Cooper’s views. Cooper had argued that personal identity is not maintained either in this life or into the next, but, nevertheless, claimed that we have a special attachment to, and justification to pursue, the interests of our successive selves over any other persons, including our own children. But Hazlitt

²³ Lawrence M. Trawick III, ‘Sources of Hazlitt’s “metaphysical discovery”’, *Philological Quarterly*, 42 (1963) II: 277–82, was the first to try to reconstruct the sources of Hazlitt’s insight. His view that Joseph Butler’s ‘Dissertation on personal identity’ was involved was surely right but Trawick didn’t go beyond that source on the issue of identity, and he thought that Butler’s *Sermons on Human Nature* also played a role in the discovery. Yet, Hazlitt, according to his own account, was not acquainted with the *Sermons* at the time of the discovery (William Hazlitt, ‘My First Acquaintance with Poets’, op. cit., p. 11). More recently, David Bromwich, op. cit., discusses Tucker’s influence on Hazlitt’s theory, but Bromwich’s focus is on Hazlitt’s theory of action, not his theory of identity and what matters in survival. Finally, we have discussed Hazlitt’s connection to the fission literature, and to Priestley’s discussion of survival in previous publications (Martin, Barresi, and Giovannelli, op. cit.; Martin and Barresi, op. cit., 2000), but without mentioning Cooper or Belsham.

²⁴ Hazlitt, *ibid.*, 133–4.

²⁵ Hazlitt, *ibid.*, 134.

probably wondered: is this right? If these future selves are not, strictly speaking, my own self, why should I not prefer to help others over these future similar selves?

At this point two ideas may have arisen in Hazlitt's mind: first, that there could be fission descendants at the resurrection; second, that we are connected to our future selves only by use of our imagination. From the idea of fission, it became obvious to Hazlitt that God was free to create multiple continuers of any self, and to reward or punish them in different ways. But, if fission could occur, on what basis could one decide which of these descendants maintained the identity of the original self? Or, even if these continuers were *not*, strictly speaking, identical with one's self, which of them should one care about? Wherein is self-concern to be satisfied?²⁶ At this point, the second idea may have come to Hazlitt's mind, whereby he recognized that one's only real present connection to the future, whether to future continuer selves or to others, is through imagination. Moreover, he recognized that imagination, as the main faculty in the service of action, is indifferent to whether the future is of self or other, hence that choice is not automatically in the service of self-interest.²⁷

From these two reflections, Hazlitt probably concluded that there can, in fact, be no absolute self with any right to demand the obligation of self-interest. Thus, any self-interested motivation had to be acquired rather than be instilled in our nature. And, since there is no actual absolute personal identity there can be no absolute metaphysical justification in pursuing our own ultimate interest over the interests of others.²⁸ We are prudentially free to act in favor of the future interests of other persons, over the future interests of those successive selves that form the chain of selves typically associated with our own changing human body. Self-interest cannot be the ultimate justification for moral obligation because there is no relation of absolute identity between successive selves to guarantee that these selves are the same self. Hence, there can be no metaphysical basis for claiming that we have a special obligation to pursue our own future interests over the future interests of others.²⁹

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²⁶ Hazlitt, *ibid.*, 135–6.

²⁷ Hazlitt, *ibid.*, 136–7.

²⁸ Hazlitt, *ibid.*, 138–40.

²⁹ Barresi read an earlier version of this paper at the Atlantic Region Philosophers Association Annual Conference, 14 October 2000 at University of Kings College, Halifax, NS. He wishes to thank the Social Science and Humanity Research Council of Canada for providing support for the research upon which the paper is based.