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ARTICLE



## J.S. Mill's 'psychological theory' of the mind

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines John Stuart Mill's 'psychological theory' of the mind, as he set it out in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*. After outlining Mill's theory and the problem he finds with it, the paper discusses four different interpretations that have been suggested, before proposing a new alternative reading. The matter is of intrinsic interest to anyone who sees value in trying to get to the bottom of tricky texts about puzzling questions by great philosophers, but I argue also that the investigation may help us with another vexed interpretative issue relating to an even more famous philosopher, David Hume, and that it may hold lessons for the philosophy of mind today.



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This paper examines John Stuart Mill's 'psychological theory' of the mind, as he set it out in his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton's Philosophy*<sup>1</sup> (1865). The matter is of intrinsic interest to anyone who sees value in trying to get to the bottom of tricky texts about puzzling questions by great philosophers but, if further motivation is wanted, I argue that the investigation may help us with another vexed issue in the history of philosophy, relating to an even more famous philosopher, David Hume, and that it may also hold lessons for the philosophy of mind today.

In Chapter XI of his *Examination of Sir William Hamilton*, Mill puts forward a "psychological theory of the belief in an external world", his famous phenomenalism, according to which a material object is understood as a "permanent possibility of sensation" (CW IX:183). In the chapter that follows he goes on to inquire whether this theory may also be used to account for the idea we have

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<sup>1</sup>Page references given to Volume IX of *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill*.

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of our own mind, ego, or self – he variously uses all three of these terms. He suggests that:

The belief I entertain that my mind exists when it is not feeling, nor thinking, nor conscious of its own existence, resolves itself into the belief of a Permanent Possibility of these states. If I think of myself as in dreamless sleep, or in the sleep of death, and believe that I, or in other words my mind, is or will be existing through these states, though not in conscious feeling, the most scrupulous examination of my belief will not detect in it any fact actually believed, except that my capability of feeling is not, in that interval, permanently destroyed, and is suspended only because it does not meet with the combination of conditions which would call it into action: the moment it did meet with that combination it would revive, and remains, therefore, a Permanent Possibility. Thus far, there seems no hindrance to our regarding Mind as nothing but the series of our sensations (to which must now be added our internal feelings), as they actually occur, with the addition of infinite possibilities of feeling requiring for their actual realization conditions which may or may not take place, but which as possibilities are always in existence, and many of them present.

(CW IX:189)

Mill thus sets himself firmly against the view that our knowledge of the self is based on any sort of direct intuition or perception – as Hamilton and Mansel suppose (he claims)<sup>2</sup> – urging instead that it is an ‘acquired product’, or type of construction, and he goes on to defend this theory against three objections; that it is incompatible with what we suppose when we believe in the existence of other minds, that it cannot explain the sense in which God is a mind, and that it leaves no room for any conception of immortality. Each rebutted, one after the other, these objections are judged to be ‘groundless’. However, Mill also calls them ‘extrinsic’ – by which he appears to mean that they concern *applications* of the theory rather than its adequacy to the task for which it has been devised – and he tells us that, additionally, “the theory has intrinsic difficulties which we have not yet set forth, and which it seems to me beyond the power of metaphysical analysis to remove” (CW IX:193).

The life of the mind consists in more than just a series of present sensations, points out Mill. It is characterized also by memory and expectation. “If, therefore, we speak of the Mind as a series of feelings, we are obliged to complete the statement by calling it a series of feelings which is aware of itself as past and future”. These further components, he protests, the psychological theory is quite unable to account for, finding itself utterly defeated by them and facing a “final inexplicability” (CW IX:194). Evidently Mill thought the problem not only insoluble, but serious, for he returns to it in the Appendix added to the third edition of the *Examination*, (1867) repeating his conclusion that the psychological theory of mind “has intrinsic

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<sup>2</sup>That claim is probably unfair to both Hamilton and Mansel but may be left to stand.



difficulties, which no one has been able to remove" (CW IX:2045), and he rehearses the difficulties yet again in the notes which he penned to accompany the new (1869) edition of his father's, *The Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*.<sup>3</sup> Mill finds the mind's capacity for memory and expectation as deniable as it is incomprehensible, and so he concludes:

I think, by far the wisest thing we can do, is to accept the inexplicable fact, without any theory of how it takes place; and when we are obliged to speak of it in terms which assume a theory, to use them with a reservation as to their meaning.

(CW IX:194)

Ever since it first appeared, Mill's perplexity has generated perplexity of its own. His star pupil, Alexander Bain, confessed himself at a loss to see the difficulty. He protests that he simply does not recognize the problem that Mill identifies within his own theory about the self. Where Mill thought he saw a fundamental point respecting the possibility of self-awareness Bain was able to see only a trivial question about memory. "For myself, I never could see where his difficulty lay, or what moved him to say that the belief in memory is incomprehensible or essentially irresolvable".<sup>4</sup> Likewise, to James McCosh, the alleged 'intrinsic difficulties' of the theory were "very much the creation of the theorist", for even if an abstract ego is not given in self-consciousness, the concrete ego is, and it is just a plain and given fact that "in every conscious act there is a knowledge of self as acting, and in every remembrance of a past experience of self, as having had the experience".<sup>5</sup> W.L.Courtney struggled with the fact that, surely, if Mill was correct that 'expectation' was unachievable, that impossibility would also undermine the 'psychological theory' of *matter* as a 'permanent possibility of sensation' every bit as much as it would its associated theory of *mind*.<sup>6</sup>

Mill's philosophy of mind has not attracted much interest in modern times, but the few recent commentators who have paid attention to it have also expressed both puzzlement about what Mill's worry was and doubt about whether it is really something to be very worried about. Various different readings of the alleged problem have been suggested, although commentators have rarely acknowledged their divergences from each other, and in this paper, I attempt to bring some order to the discussion by distinguishing between four separate interpretations that have been suggested, before proposing an alternative of my own. Undoubtedly one reason why different analyses have been offered is that the original

<sup>3</sup>*Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 2:174

<sup>4</sup>Bain, *John Stuart Mill, A Criticism*, 121–2. See also *Emotions and the Will* (4th edition), 532ff.

<sup>5</sup>McCosh, *An Examination of Mr.J.S.Mill's Philosophy*, 96, 441.

<sup>6</sup>Courtney, *Metaphysics of Mill*, 69.



text itself is unclear, and for this reason I do not wish to press too hard for my own reading. Textual interpretative work of this kind is always both conjectural and contentious, and there is plenty in Mill to suggest different ways of taking his meaning. Moreover, it remains perfectly possible that the reason why Mill's text itself is so unclear is that he himself was unclear about just what was worrying him. This is no criticism. Much of the best philosophy has been produced by thinkers working at the very limits of our understanding, and even the effort to untangle different readings of a text can in itself be philosophically useful to us.

Mill introduces his puzzle thus. Having offered a definition of mind as mind as nothing but "series of feelings, with a background of possibilities of feeling" (CW IX:193) – which series includes internal feelings – Mill reminds us that "Besides present feelings, and possibilities of present feeling, there is another class of phaenomena to be included in an enumeration of the elements making up our conception of Mind" (CW IX:193). These are memory and expectation. The "peculiarity" about these is that "each of them involves a belief in more than its own existence" (CW IX:194). It is not entirely clear what 'more' he is referring to here, but looking at the key passages and the existing critical literature several distinct possibilities emerge.

## 1.

The 'more' which worries Mill here might be the (actual) past and (anticipated) future experiences themselves to which our memories and expectations point, for to remember something is to recall a past experience while to anticipate something is expect a future experience. A perception or feeling is a present sensation and nothing further. And for a Berkeleyan like Mill, to recognize yourself as having such a sensation commits you only to a belief in its present existence. Its reality is something which a presentist or temporal solipsist could happily affirm. By contrast, a memory or expectation is more complex; "each of them involves a belief in more than its own present existence". They also are present sensations, but in addition to this they carry with them a reference to another experience not currently before the mind – in the case of memory, a reference to a previous experience you have had which the memory resembles or recalls, and in the case of expectation, a reference to a future experience you anticipate having which the expectation represents to you. To recognize oneself as having such a memory or expectation involves, as Mill puts it, the further "suggestion and belief" in (or in more modern terms we might say, the further 'reference to') an additional past or future experience. Mill's puzzle may be, how it is that a current mental state refers beyond its own temporal bounds to these further and temporally distant mental events. For certainly, if you thought that a strict adherence to empiricism committed you to some sort of



presentism, then the existence of memory and expectation would be an embarrassment.<sup>7</sup>

Putting to one side the faculty of expectation,<sup>8</sup> one might attempt to distinguish between perceptions and memories by their *qualitative* character, perhaps appealing in Humean style to differences in their ‘force and vivacity’. But Mill shows no inclination to go down that route, and instead characterizes memories externally, by their reference to a real past which they copy or represent. Memory must be counted an additional “source of intuitive knowledge besides present consciousness” (CW IX:165n).

However, this point must be properly understood. An experience is not a memory just because it copies a past experience, for it is also intrinsic to memory that it *claims* to do so. It already *announces itself* as copying the past. It contains within itself a reference beyond itself to the past. Although to be a genuine memory an idea currently before the mind must indeed correspond to the past – a false memory is no memory at all – it is not a memory simply because of that correspondence to the past; rather, it has that character already in itself. In this sense, if we are to properly fix the epistemological order, it must be admitted that it is not because we first find it to copy the past that we then regard some mental state as a memory, rather it is because we first regard it as a memory that we then suppose it copies the past. And this seems to be precisely what Mill finds puzzling. He hopes, by looking at the mind in the present moment of its being, to find reason to attribute to it a past, only to discover that he cannot properly grasp the quality of its present being without first understanding it to have a past.

This may have been Mill’s worry (or at least a part of it), but the reading fails to satisfy fully. For one thing, the problem as set out here just looks like a straightforward problem about *intentionality*. How can an idea currently before the mind refer to something beyond or other than itself? How can we ever speak about more than our own ideas? Mill’s attitude towards this general question is not uniform. With respect to *material objects* he denies that we ever can do this, but with respect to *other minds* he is perfectly content that such reference should take place. That difference in attitude tells us he has no objection *in principle* to extra-mental reference, but of course it *might* nonetheless be the case that he doubts the ability of mental states to refer beyond the present to a real past or future. However, he never says so explicitly.

Further evidence against this reading comes from the fact that, were this his concern, it would hold respecting *any* present thought about past or

<sup>7</sup>This is explored in Hamilton’s, “Mill, Phenomenalism and the Self”, 166–7.

<sup>8</sup>It should be noted that in the Appendix, Mill says the thing that really puzzles him is *memory*. Indeed, he says that both psychologically and logically, expectation is a consequence of memory (CW IX:206–7). It is not entirely clear what is meant by this, but presumably the point is that you can only expect a future for yourself where you already think in terms of an ongoing self and that is something first acquired through memory.



future events, yet Mill seems to have in mind a narrower target, specifically *memories and expectations respecting ourselves*.

## 2.

That there is more to the problem he locates than just reference to, or realism about, past and future times is recognized by Mill himself. In his notes to the reissue of his father's book, *The Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, he puts it this way:

What is Memory? It is not merely having the idea of that fact recalled: that is but thought, or conception, or imagination. It is, having the idea recalled along with the Belief that the fact which it is the idea of, really happened, and moreover happened to myself. Memory, therefore, by the very fact of its being different from Imagination, implies an Ego who formerly experienced the facts remembered, and who was the same Ego then as now (*Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind* 2:174).

Accordingly, it might be suggested that the 'more' he has in mind might be *the connection* which a memory asserts to hold between the present state of remembering and the temporally distant events it recalls, its presupposition of the ongoing life of some 'Ego' present at both points, or as Mill later puts it: "the inexplicable tie ... which connects the present consciousness with the past one" (CW IX:207). In designating certain present states 'memories', we are claiming not just that there occurred some corresponding past experience, but that this was enjoyed by *the very same self* which is currently having the experience of remembering it. The 'something more' therefore seems to be a substantive metaphysical or ontological link; although it should be noted that immediately after proposing it, Mill expresses uncertainty as to whether this connecting link should be regarded as something *itself intuited* or just something *posited as a necessary condition* for the occurrence of a genuine memory.

Like Hume, Mill insists that we have no original perception or intuition of the self. Instead, he maintains we should understand memory as prior to the concept we have of self, and our basis for it.

I see no reason to think that there is any cognizance of an Ego until Memory commences .... Our very notion of a Self takes its commencement (there is every reason to suppose) from the representation of a sensation in memory. (CW IX:207)<sup>9</sup>

But while the notion of an enduring self that we thus construct out of our memories is an acquired concept, that in itself is no reason to regard it as a

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<sup>9</sup>"The notion of a Self is, I apprehend, a consequence of Memory. There is no meaning in the word Ego or I, unless the I of to-day is also the I of yesterday; a permanent element which abides through a succession of feelings, and connects the feeling of each moment with the remembrance of previous feelings" (*Analysis of the Human Mind* 1:229).



fiction without any foundation. And in Mill's view, it is not. The "inexplicable tie" which connects a present consciousness to a past experience is not simply our own creation, he argues. "That there is something real in this tie, real as the sensations themselves, and not a mere product of the laws of thought without any fact corresponding to it, I hold to be indubitable" (CW IX:207). Hume takes a constructivist attitude towards *our concepts* of both material objects and the minds that perceive them. However, while Mill's phenomenalism about the external material world itself is certainly reductionist – there is nothing more to matter than the permanent possibility of certain types of experiencing – with respect to the self, at the last, he seems to be a realist. Although he allows that when we introspect, all we actually experience is a series of feelings, he nonetheless argues that we have to regard ourselves as something more than just that.

Whatever be the nature of the real existence we are compelled to acknowledge in Mind, the Mind is only known to itself phaenomenally, as the series of its feelings of consciousnesses. We are forced to apprehend every part of the series as linked with the other parts by something in common, which is not the feelings themselves.  
(CW IX:207)

William James scoffed that "Mr. Mill's habitual method of philosophizing was to affirm boldly some general doctrine derived from his father, and then make so many concessions of detail to its enemies as practically to abandon it altogether", and James complains that, in deferring to such a real but inexplicable tie, Mill concedes "something very like the soul".<sup>10</sup> It is easy enough to see why James might respond in this way, for the sort of linkages or connections that Mill might seem to have in mind here – perhaps some underlying substratum that endures as its various qualities change, or some causal nexus that binds temporally separated mental events together into one continuous story – look very much like a metaphysics of spiritual substance.

Yet while it is possible to see why James makes the charge he does, it might just be that the lure and shine of his own rhetorical flourish here prevents him from asking himself how plausible his complaint really is. The suddenness of the alleged volte-face might in itself seem a reason for wondering whether we have correctly captured Mill's worry here. For this reading attributes a curiously out-of-character move to a thinker who, for the most part, eschews all supra-empirical speculation.

A comparison may help us here. John Locke locates memory in continuity of consciousness, which he sharply distinguishes from the continuity of any material, or organic, or spiritual substance. This is what makes his account strange, for we wonder how there can be identity of consciousness without some vehicle for it. Yet Locke defends his approach by telling us that he is offering a strictly *forensic* account – one designed to meet our

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<sup>10</sup>James, *The Principles of Philosophy*, 1:357–8.



*practical* conceptions of responsibility, punishment and reward – something he feels able to do without offering any deeper metaphysical basis. Now, if Mill is similarly practical in his approach, if all he is trying to do is to offer an account of how we come to think of ourselves as ourselves, as creatures with pasts and futures, it is odd that he should suddenly feel the need to be *more metaphysical* than Locke. Certainly, Mill feels no such pressure when it comes to talking about *the material world*. The external material world is nothing more than certain permanent possibilities of perception. Readers unpersuaded by phenomenalism about material reality tend to feel that the theory is incomplete, and are inclined to say that it is the underlying metaphysical reality of physical objects that explains why under certain circumstances we would have the perceptions we would, and not the other way round. Mill would just reject that response, but that makes it hard to see why we should read him as taking such a different attitude with respect to the mind. Why would so ardent an empiricist have simply given up the game and supposed himself forced to accept the ontological reality of an inexplicable metaphysical tie in order to explain memory and anticipation?

### 3.

A third suggestion for understanding Mill's concern about our idea of the mind construes the problem as one of circularity or begging the question. The past experience that we must assume to have really occurred and that we must assume to be really connected with our current act of remembering is not just any old experience from the past, but specifically one of *mine*. Mill tells us that the phenomena of memory and expectation cannot "be adequately expressed, without saying that the belief they include is, that I myself formerly had, or that I myself, and no other, shall hereafter have, the sensations remembered or expected" (CW IX:194). On this reading the 'something more' that worries him would seem to be a further thought about *ownership*. Our current mental states are psychologically connected with past and future ones, but only with *our own* past and future ones. Yet how out of the many past and futures experience that have and will take place are we to identify *our own*, unless we already have a criterion of our own personal identity – precisely what we were trying to establish in the first place? Alan Ryan expresses the problem thus, "the fatal flaw of the phenomenalist account of personal identity is that in order to construct the series of thoughts which constitute a given person, the principle of selection which we must employ to construct the *correct* series already involves reference to the person whose thoughts they are".<sup>11</sup> We might perhaps regard the *external*

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<sup>11</sup>Ryan, *The Philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, 100. Hamilton also reads Mill in this way ("Mill Phenomenalism and the Self," 167–8).



*world* as a construction that we make out of our own sensations, but it seems straightforwardly question-begging to attempt the same kind of analysis for understanding *ourselves*, to say that *we* are a construction that *we* make out of *our own* sensations?

If this is Mill's worry, it must be admitted that it is an old one. The objection goes back to Joseph Butler who persuasively argued that since one can remember only one's own experiences, never anyone else's, it seems that memory presupposes personal identity, rather than personal identity presupposing memory.<sup>12</sup> However, I am doubtful whether this proposal in fact gets to the heart of what is really worrying Mill in this case. His stated view is that we have no direct intuition of a self, but that memory comes first and we subsequently 'construct' our idea of selfhood from that. However, it must be allowed that when he thinks more deeply about the phenomenon of memory he finds but little priority here. He sees scarcely any difference between the experience of remembering and the sense we have of our own enduring self. He says memory "is as near as I think we can get to a positive conception of Self" (CW IX:207), while in the notes to the new edition of *The Analysis of the Human Mind*, he says "The phenomenon of Self and that of Memory are merely two sides of the same fact" (*Analysis* 2:174). But if these two experiences – memory and selfhood – are really so close as to be indistinguishable, then it hardly makes sense for him to be complaining that the former presupposes the latter.

#### 4.

A fourth reading of Mill's problem locates the 'something extra' in a certain sort of puzzle about self-reflexivity. Mill concludes his statement of the problem by saying: "If, therefore, we speak of the Mind as a series of feelings, we are obliged to complete the statement by calling it a series of feelings which is aware of itself as past and future". We are faced with "the paradox, that something which *ex hypothesi* is but a series of feelings, can be aware of itself as a series" (CW IX:194). If we take this statement as our chief clue, then Mill's problem might seem to be same as that which was first explicitly drawn attention to by Hume, namely the invisibility of the experiencing mind to itself, the fact that the subject of experience is the one thing that can never be found among the many objects of its awareness.<sup>13</sup> Further support for this interpretation is found in the way that Mill, in trying to articulate the problem, finds it

<sup>12</sup>"... [O]ne should really think it self-evident that consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity; any more than knowledge, in any other case, can constitute truth, which it presupposes". *The Analogy of Religion*. Dissertation I: Of Personal Identity.

<sup>13</sup>"For my part, when I enter most intimately into what I call myself I always stumble on some particular perception or other, of heat or cold, light or shade, love or hatred, pain or pleasure. I never can catch myself at any time without a perception, and never can observe any thing but the perception". (*Treatise* p.252).



necessary to shift from the third person language he has been using to that of the first person. The essence of what we believe when we remember or anticipate cannot be adequately expressed, he tells us, “without saying that the belief they include is, that I myself formerly had, or that I myself, and no other, shall hereafter have, the sensations remembered or expected” (CW IX:194). Some commentators have taken this to be the heart of Mill’s problem. Capaldi, for example, offers a reading like this, concluding that the lesson to be learned here is a familiar one, that “We cannot treat the subject as itself an object or a series of objects”, that “No further philosophical explanation of the self is possible. The self is a condition of knowledge not an object of knowledge” (Capaldi, “Mill on Metaphysics,” 230, 231).

To push back against this reading, while there can be no denying that Mill does talk about the series of mental states that makes up the mind being aware of itself, it can also be argued that this is an inaccurate, misleading and a careless way of speaking. A series cannot be aware of anything. Moreover, nothing in Mill’s theory requires him to say that it can be. Reflexive self-awareness occurs, and a person may be aware of their past, but these things are perfectly explicable in terms of the basic theory put forward. As Skorupski explains:

For me to remember a previous conscious state is for the series of conscious states which constitute my existence to *include* a consciousness of some previous state together with the belief that that previous conscious state is part of the same series as the present one.<sup>14</sup>

This seems correct and so, unless we are to attribute to Mill a gross misunderstanding of his own theory, this series-aware-of-itself reading of his difficulty is better avoided.

A further reason to avoid this reading is that in the text Mill expresses no worry about *current* self-reflexion, only about reflexivity with reference to past or future. But if the problem were at bottom one about mind’s ability to be aware of itself *per se*, one would expect it to be expressed in wholly general terms. That I have a headache *now* would be every bit as problematic as thinking that I had one in the past or that I expect one tomorrow morning; that the bundle of perceptions which constitutes me should realize that it contains a headache sensation, would be every bit as difficult as realizing that it used to or will soon contain a headache sensation.

## 5.

I wish now to propose an alternative way of reading of Mill’s concern about his own theory of the mind. In his commentary to the new edition of his father’s *Analysis*, Mill says that the

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<sup>14</sup>Skorupski, *John Stuart Mill*, 237.



succession of feelings, which I call my memory of the past, is that by which I distinguish my Self. Myself is the person who had that series of feelings, and I know nothing of myself, by direct knowledge, except that I had them. But there is a bond of some sort among all the parts of the series, which makes me say that they were feelings of a person *who was the same person throughout* ... and this bond, to me, constitutes my Ego.<sup>15</sup>

It would appear to be this self-same continuing subject – here today, yesterday and tomorrow – that he is aiming to pick out by the phrase ‘I myself’ when he states, in the *Examination*, that the peculiar phenomena of memory and expectation cannot be adequately understood except as involving the belief “that *I myself* formerly had, or that *I myself* ... shall hereafter have, the sensations remembered or expected” (CW IX:194, italics added). Summing up his puzzle, he states that

The true incomprehensibility perhaps is, that something which has ceased, or is not yet in existence, can still be, in a manner, present: that a series of feelings, the infinitely greater part of which is past or future, can be gathered up, as it were, into a single present conception, accompanied by a belief of reality.  
(CW IX:194)

How are we to understand these admittedly opaque statements? I suggest that it is useful here to recall the difference between *perdurance* and *endurance* views of substance; the difference, at any one time, between supposing that you are presented with a time-slice or temporal-part of some object, and supposing that you are presented with a complete object, a whole which enjoys an extended life-time, even if you are not currently presented with the entirety of that life. Putting to one side the question of whether or not perdurance theory works for *material objects*, one way to read Mill here would be as claiming that the time-slice picture cannot work for *selves*. Mill’s empiricism allows him but one tool to construct the universe – given sensation. Out of this he must construct the present, and out of the present, the past and the future. Nothing else makes sense on his methodology. But when he turns to think about the self, this approach fails him utterly. The problem is that I cannot even regard myself as having a present – as being a present subject – unless I regard myself as having a past and future. Without thinking of it as preceded by a past or followed by a future we would simply not recognize a moment of consciousness as that at all. That is just what it is to think of yourself as an existing subject of experience.<sup>16</sup> A well-constructed poem is a whole, not a mere combination of lines. Each line or phrase gains its meaning and significance from its place in the whole. That context defines its very identity. In similar fashion, a

<sup>15</sup> *Analysis of the Phenomena of the Human Mind*, 2:175 (italics added).

<sup>16</sup> There is a certain similarity with a Leibnizian ‘complete concept’ which, even if it exists ‘now’ rather than ‘timelessly’ (something which Leibniz seems to suggest), is nonetheless ‘laden with the past and big with the future’.



moment in life draws its very identity from the life to which it belongs, especially its past. Such holism is part of our natural understanding of who, at any point in time, we are, but it runs into direct conflict with a temporal atomism which holds that the identity of what exists at any given time is limited to and by the temporal borders of the time at which it exists.

At any moment we may suppose we are faced with a complete object or entity, but this is a sort of illusion. It must be remembered that perception is more than just sensation, and when I look at the house across the street I may sense only two sides of it, but I do not see a two-sided house. In similar fashion, Mill appreciates that, even if our experience of ourselves is itself instantaneous, it is understood as an experience of something enduring. An object possessed of temporal endurance, even if the greater part of its life is done or still to come, is to us nonetheless wholly present ('gathered up') in the here and now. This fact utterly frustrates Mill's project. His hope was to build up the notion of an enduring self by linking together, through memory, a series of self-stages; as though these could be joined to each other like a set of individual links to make up one complete chain. And the difficulty and incomprehensibility which he faces is that of realizing that he has understood the project completely back to front. Unless one first has the notion of an enduring self, there can be no momentary self-stages. An analogy suggests itself. A line contains geometrical points, but no single point could ever itself be a line, nor may a line be built up of such points. They are *points on a line*. In similar fashion, although the life of a conscious individual may contain time-slices (moments of its existence), no single time-slice could itself be a conscious individual – a momentary self, as it were – nor could any set of such time-slices be added up together as parts to yield a conscious individual.

The reason why Mill finds himself in this difficulty with respect to *mind* but not *matter*, as he himself explains, is because "certain of the attributes comprised in our notion of the Ego, and which are at the very foundation of it, namely Memory and Expectation, have no equivalent in Matter" (CW IX:205). Prima facie, with material objects, endurance and perdurance would seem to be two equally viable choices. It would seem possible to analyse the being of material substance in either of these ways. But selves are different. They are self-aware. And they are not just already existing objects which, additionally, possess the further characteristic of self-awareness – an awareness which might or might not be accurate. Rather, the self exists in, and is constituted by, its own self-consciousness. A transparent being without depth, the conscious self necessarily is what it finds itself to be. We have the identity we understand ourselves as having, for we are *self-interpreting* beings. Unlike the objects of any scientific study, what we are cannot be regarded as something wholly separate from what we take ourselves



to be.<sup>17</sup> Thus, if we understand our current existence as involving our past and future existence, then it does so. Mill is surely correct in claiming that memory and anticipation are essential elements in what it is to be a self or person – consciousness without them is inconceivable – but in that case, at any given moment we are taking ourselves to be beings endowed with a whole lifetime, even if that lifetime is not in that moment wholly present. Here it may be helpful to remember that Mill's task at this juncture is more properly understood as conceptual analysis, not First Philosophy. His is not so much a point in *constructive metaphysics*; one about whether a series of momentary states can be linked together to form a whole life. Rather, it is one about our self-understanding; questioning whether *our idea* of a whole life can be arrived at by just combing a set of momentary states. And Mill finds himself stumbling before the fact that, conceptually, the notion of a whole life comes before the idea of a moment in that life. Life is not a collection of time-slices because, first, they need to be recognized as time-slices *of that life*.

Against the argument offered here, it might be objected that if Bertrand Russell was correct in supposing we could imagine that the world just popped into existence five minutes – or five seconds – ago,<sup>18</sup> might not our understanding of our present experience, as but one moment in the life of an enduring being, be similarly illusory? In a significant sense the answer to that question is, No. We could be mistaken about the size of our lawn, its length and breadth. And in the same way we could be mistaken about the duration of our lives, how much time we have seen or how much we may yet expect to see. But we could not be mistaken that we are *entities whose nature is to endure*. We could no more be an instantaneous time-slice than our lawn be a geometrical point. Mill realizes that a time-slice *self* is incoherent. It is not a complete or coherent self-existent unit that you could add to other similar units, treating them all as parts of one larger whole.

If this account of Mill's concerns about his own 'psychological theory' of the self is accepted there are perhaps two lessons which we might learn. One pertains to the history of philosophy and how we might read another famous empiricist, David Hume. The history of philosophy throws up many similarities but one of the most striking is this. Two of the greatest British Empiricists, Hume and Mill, from similar starting points, both attempt to put forward constructive theories of the self, of what we mean when we speak of our own mind. Having done so, they both have second thoughts and withdraw their accounts as flawed. But in each case, the reason for the withdrawal is obscure, leaving subsequent commentators perplexed. Now, Mill and Hume's sensationalist theories of the mind are certainly not the

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<sup>17</sup>Taylor, *Sources of the Self*, 34.

<sup>18</sup>Russell, *The Analysis of Mind*, 159–60.



same, but we may well wonder if the identification of Mill's problem helps with the identification of Hume's.

In the Appendix to his *Treatise*, Hume summarizes his concern.

In short there are two principles, which I cannot render consistent; nor is it in my power to renounce either of them, viz. *that all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences*, and *that the mind never perceives any real connexion among distinct existences*.<sup>19</sup>

The puzzle here is why this is a puzzle. Elsewhere in his philosophy – for instance with respect to the external world or with respect to our understanding of causation – Hume accepts both principles and calls upon the human faculty of imagination or association to connect together the ideas in question. Why is he not willing to continue to do that with respect to the self? Drawing on the proposed reading of Mill set out above, one answer which might be suggested is that the sense in which 'all our distinct perceptions are distinct existences' is different between these sorts of cases. With the external world, we may think broadly in terms of *composition* – we may understand a substance as essentially made up from the set of its perceived qualities. Similarly, a causal relation may be thought of as a cause *adjoined with* its the effect. But with the self, although its states and ideas certainly occur separately, at different times, they are not really distinct existences which can be combined into a greater whole. They presuppose each other – not, indeed, in their content, for their contents need not overlap at all – but in their very existence, in their ownership.

The second possible lesson to learn takes us beyond history of philosophy altogether. Challenging the efforts of contemporary philosophers who put forward such views,<sup>20</sup> it may be that Mill's discussion has the power to make us think twice about the possibility of taking up a perdurance account of the self. If that lesson were allowed, one might draw the limited lesson that four-dimensionalism works for physical things but not minds. And perhaps that is all we should conclude. However, since four-dimensionalism is more usually presented as a general theory of *all* existing things, one might instead conclude that if cannot explain the temporality of *all* objects, it must give up its pretension to explain the temporality of *any*.

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<sup>19</sup>*Treatise*, 636. For a close textual analysis of Hume's own words, as well as useful classificatory analysis of the extensive secondary literature on this subject, see Garrett, "Rethinking Hume's Second Thoughts About Personal Identity".

<sup>20</sup>See, for example, Velleman, "So It Goes".



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