DISINTERESTEDNESS AND SELF FORMATION: PRINCIPLES OF ACTION IN WILLIAM HAZLITT.

Jack Barbalet

Abstract.
The concept of self interest is core to modern understandings of individual desire and need. It is also central in the concept of *homo economicus* and, in a variety of forms, underpins economic science. The critical discussion of the notion of self interest in William Hazlitt, *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805), remains unknown in sociology and economics even though it resolves a number of key problems associated with the concept and makes an original indeed unique contribution to action theory. In particular, Hazlitt shows that the basis on which an individual pursues their own interest is identical with their sympathy with the interests of others. Hazlitt shows that a clear distinction between self and other cannot be sustained, and that an individual is as remote from their future self as they are from any other person. Even the ‘sexual appetite’ Hazlitt shows cannot be understood in terms of simple self interest as it is stimulated and consummated through mental and reciprocal capacities. These and related aspects of Hazlitt’s *Principles* are set out below, and their relevance for an understanding of self-interested action and self formation demonstrated.

Keywords.
Self interest, futurity, imagination, sympathy, self formation, William Hazlitt

Introduction.
The characterization of modernity in terms of individuation is pervasive and has numerous consequences, both practical and intellectual. The related Lockian notion, that individuals are the proprietors of their own capacities, is not simply axiomatic for claims to and theories of rights in private property, but is overall the basis of liberal theory. While sociology as a discipline has developed through critical engagement with the concept of ‘private individual’ and its implications, acceptance of the notion, on the other hand, has constituted the foundation of modern economic science. In this latter case the idea of an individual person, aware of their own objective identity which distinguishes them from others and which enjoys continuous existence, entails that the individual’s subjective desires or preferences inform their necessary satisfactions and welfare. This is the idea of an integral self with connected interests. This concept, self interest, underpins not only market relations but ultimately human rights in so far as it indicates that significant constraint on the self-defined aspirations of individuals will injure their sustaining conditions and inhibit their potential for growth. The concept of self interest is therefore experientially and normatively essential for an understanding of the human condition in the West at least since the seventeenth century.

Sociology’s critical concern regarding the concept of self interest testifies to its importance, while incompleteness of resolution of these concerns indicates the resilience of that concept. One obvious problem with the concept of self interest is its supposed exclusivity. In the face of strong evidence of selfless or other-interested behaviour philosophical egoism holds that sympathetic action toward another, for instance, is ultimately self interested when it gives satisfaction to the sympathetic actor involved. Parallel developments in economic theory have assimilated other-interested action into accounts premised on a postulate of self interest by regarding the former either as a complicating trait of or a contextual constraint on self-interested behaviour. In this way other-interested actions
can be incorporated into a person’s structure of preferences on the one hand, or conceived as giving rise to an externality, tax or public-good cost on the other, thus leaving intact the supposition regarding the primacy of self interest but acknowledging the possibility of other-interest action and its consequences. These adjustments to the postulate of self interest attempt to meet the empirical evidence of other-interested behaviour in social and economic life while leaving its logical structure intact. How far they succeed can be measured by the critical discussion within the economics discipline of the theoretical limitations of its behavioural foundations (Davis 2003; Sen 1977, 1985, 1997).

The social context of self interest, and its prior ontological or causal determination by collective factors, is frequently emphasized in sociological accounts, although contrary claims regarding the motivational and explanatory power of individual self interest is also well represented in sociological literatures. The structural and interactional preconditions of self interest, its contextual location and temporizing influences, have been summarized in the concept of ‘embeddedness’, explicitly generated in a critique of *homo economicus* and the principle of self interest embodied in it (Granovetter 1985). Such accounts, however, step over rather than provide an alternative to those premised on self-interested action and fail to provide adequate examination and critique of the latter: indeed, they tend to leave the question of action itself in doubt (Beckert 2003). Parallel to these developments has been a growing acceptance in sociology of theories of action exploiting the logical power of the postulate of self interest current in the economics literature (Coleman 1990). Rational choice approaches in sociology tend to account for other-interested behaviour by assimilating it into the preferences of self-interested actors or their contextual constraints, in the manner of economic theory.

The logical limitations of an argument concerning behaviour which functions in terms of the primacy of a self interest modified by other-interested preferences or constraints is that it is indistinguishable from one which gives primacy to other-interested motives modified by self-interested tastes and constraints. In particular, there continue to be in all accounts and applications of the concept of self interest insufficiently articulated and unexamined assumptions concerning personal identity in the nature of ‘self’ as well as inadequately understood aspects of ‘interested’ action. These issues are core to fully specifying the nature of individual self interest and its social significance. They do not require treatment of the social structural context of individual action nor of the unavoidable nexus between persons and the networks of associations in which they are located. They do require, however, an appreciation of the complexity of the concept and experience of identity and the temporality of action in which orientation to future outcomes is germane. These issues are seldom treated in a satisfactory manner in either sociology or economics. A particularly important account, however, is provided in an early nineteenth-century essay that resolves the problems indicated here for an understanding of self-interested action and provides an original account of self formation and the nature of interest in action which resonates with some current developments in philosophy and social science. In spite of its originality and intellectual significance William Hazlitt’s *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* (1805) remains unknown in sociology and economics. The purpose of the present essay is to indicate the strengths and relevance of Hazlitt’s *Principles* for an understanding of both ‘self’ and ‘interest’ in the concept of self-interested action.

*The context of Hazlitt’s ‘Principles’.*

Hazlitt wrote the *Principles* during the historical ascendency of European industrialization, the world market, English economic theory and philosophical egoism. While he did not address economic developments and theorizing explicitly he wrote against what he saw as the serious limitations of associationist endorsement of philosophical egoism in both the
Principles and a text intended to supplement the latter and published with it, namely ‘Remarks on the Systems of Hartley and Helvetius’ (Hazlitt 1805: 143-261). His primary concern in the Principles, which shall be the focus of discussion below, is a theoretical demonstration of the disinterestedness of human action which Hazlitt achieves both by explaining the basis of the postulate of self interest in conventional understandings and by demonstrating that the means whereby a person attempts to secure their future welfare or self interest is identical with the means they would use in identifying the welfare of others. This ‘metaphysical discovery’, as Hazlitt later described it (Hazlitt 1828: 64), passed without notice at the time of publication, acquiring neither supporters nor detractors, and has remained unexplored until recently (Noxon 1963; Martin and Barresi 1995; Natarajan, Paulin and Wu 2005). This neglect of the text led Hazlitt, who published it anonymously in 1805 at the age of 26, to abandon theory and turn his attention to painting and literary criticism, for which he is remembered today.

While interest in Hazlitt as a literary and political writer has grown steadily over the past twenty years or so, the Principles has remained largely unknown and on the recent and serially singular occasions that it has been discussed it has been treated in terms of its contribution to moral philosophy (Noxon 1963), or the conceptualization of selfhood (Martin and Barresi 1995), or the relations of each of these themes to Hazlitt’s literary endeavour and its historical context (Natarajan, Paulin and Wu 2005). These sources acknowledge the originality of Principles and its anticipation of developments in the theory of the self that have independently found expression nearly two-hundred years after Hazlitt first proposed them at the beginning of the nineteenth century. The relevance of Hazlitt’s arguments in Principles for a reconstruction of the concept of self interest in economic sociology and economic theory, however, has not yet been appreciated. And yet this may well be where the fullest significance of Hazlitt’s argument lies.

Self-interested action.
The difficulty with the postulate of self interest is generally conceived to be the idea of its predominance, even exclusivity. Because self interest is a live category in economic thought it is in the economic literature that the discussion is most developed. It is, in fact, acknowledged that self interest is not the only possible motive of human conduct. Adam Smith’s warning against ‘deducing all our sentiments from certain refinements of self love’ (Smith 1759: 13) is echoed by others. Alfred Marshall, for instance, famously acknowledged the error of assuming value commensurability when he agreed that ‘egoistic motives’ may drive ‘business life’ but insisted that there is also ‘vanity and recklessness … delight in doing .. work well for its own sake … [and] sacrificing [oneself] for the sake of family, neighbours or country’ (Marshall 1890: 22). Frank Knight (1921: 52-4) and James Buchanan (1979), to mention two further economic writers, make similar acknowledgments, but agree, as Marshall also held, that heuristically economic behaviour is necessarily predicated on the postulate of self interest – or concepts derived from it, such as maximization or preference attainment. This is not to preclude other-interested motives, though, because these latter can be incorporated in a utility function as tastes or preferences and also as constraints.

The conclusions of the preceding paragraph are not accepted by all economists, however. Amartya Sen, for instance, over the course of his career, has argued that within economic explanation something other than self interest is required. According to Sen a category in which self interest is integral, namely that of revealed preference, which has been central to mainstream economic analysis at least since the 1940s (Samuelson 1938), is circular (Sen 1973). Sen, however, does not wish to expel the notion of self interest from the economic lexicon. Indeed, he seems to accept the conventional view of it when he says that sympathy for another is egoistical in the sense that it is experienced as one’s own satisfaction
(1977: 326). But if self-interested action necessarily seeks the satisfaction or welfare of the actor, there is a need in economic analysis for a category acknowledging the possibility of a preference which may lead ‘a person [to] choos[e] an act that he believes will yield a lower level of personal welfare to him than an alternative that is also available’ (Sen 1977: 327). Commitment, as opposed to self interest, Sen says ‘drives a wedge between personal choice and personal welfare, and much of traditional economic theory relies on the identity of the two’ (Sen 1977: 329).

The point to notice here is that on both sides of the argument there is a continuing assumption that self-interested action is entirely meaningful in its own terms; the issue is whether self interest (or its equivalent) is sufficient in economic explanation or whether it must be supplemented with some qualitatively distinct concept referring to an alternative basis of behaviour, motivation or evaluation. Sen, however, alludes to the difficulty of taking self interest at face value although he fails to develop the insight: ‘If a person’s actions today affect his well-being in the future, then under [the standard economic] approach his future interests must be defined in terms of the way they are assessed today. In general there is no reason to presume that the future interests as assessed today will coincide with those interests as assessed in the future’ (Sen 1977: 322, note 9; emphasis in original). The implications of this observation regarding an inter-temporal disjuncture in self interest are profound. They remain unexplored in the relevant literature even though they are fully indicated in Hazlitt’s Principles.

Hazlitt proceeds by making a small number of seemingly obvious and apparently pedestrian observations. The way in which he puts them together, however, and the conclusions he draws from their concatenation are fundamentally transformative of the conventional understanding of self interest that has been given sophisticated representation in modern economic theory. Hazlitt’s first observation is that the sense of personal welfare or self interest a person has can only derive from their direct experience of those things that satisfy their wants or the memory of their past experiences of such things: the objects that fulfil a person’s current self interest are known to them directly or by recollection. Hazlitt says that such a situation is necessarily one of self interest because the experiences referred to here are only felt by the individual in question and cannot be directly provided to anyone else as ‘there is no communication between my nerves and another’s brain’ (Hazlitt 1805: 111). Hazlitt describes the interest a person has in their present feelings or memory of past feelings as ‘exclusive or mechanical self interest’ (Hazlitt 1805: 3). A quite different possibility arises when a person has sympathy with another person’s interests. This is Hazlitt’s second common-place observation, namely that sympathy with another’s welfare can only be achieved by imagining the other person’s circumstances or experiences: ‘The only notice or perception which another can have of this sensation in me or which I can have of a similar sensation in another is by means of the imagination’ (Hazlitt 1805: 111).

The distinction just indicated, between direct experience of objects of self interest, on the one hand, and imagining such objects, on the other, is central to Hazlitt’s account of self-interested action. The objects that satisfy what Hazlitt calls ‘mechanical’ self interest exist at a present or past time and are directly experienced. The objects of self-interested action, on the other hand, are not available at the time of the action itself but exist as a consequence of the action at a subsequent or future time. This is to say that at the present time relative to the action these objects do not exist at all. This is because action is future orientated. There can be nothing controversial in Hazlitt’s claim: ‘All voluntary action, that is all action proceeding from a will, or effort of the mind to produce a certain event, must relate to the future’ (Hazlitt 1805: 21). This idea has been explicit in sociology since Talcott Parsons’ account of the unit act in which action necessarily has direction, purpose or intention, which Parsons describes as the ‘end’ of an act, ‘a future state of affairs toward which the process of action is oriented’
The implications of the futurity of action, including the radical transformation in understanding self interest, self-interested action and the self, are not discussed by Parsons, however. Their significance is fully appreciated, on the other hand, by Hazlitt.

All action directed toward securing an individual’s own self interest relates to future objects. Hazlitt says: ‘that which is future, which does not yet exist can excite no interest in itself, nor act upon the mind in any way but by means of the imagination’ (Hazlitt 1805: 22; emphasis added). The faculty of imagination, of anticipating future possibilities, may be dismissed by those who would wish the world to be entirely factual in the sense of current experience of sensation. But for Hazlitt, there could be no action and indeed no rationality without imagination. He understands the latter as ‘a power of willing a given end for itself, and of employing the means immediately necessary to the production of that end’ (Hazlitt 1805: 66; emphasis in original). Without imagination, he continues, and the actions imagination promotes, ‘all would be left to the accidental concurrence of some mechanical impulse with the immediate desire to obtain some very simple object’ (Hazlitt 1805: 66-7). If the objects of self-interested action can only be constructed imaginatively by the actor concerned, then the means a person has of accessing the objects of their self-interested actions are therefore identical with the means available to access the interests of another, as briefly noted above. In this sense, then, self-interested and other-interested actions are indistinguishable, a proposition which simply undoes the foundational assumptions of economic science as well as much modern understanding of the self.

**Discontinuity between present self and future self.**

The argument, that self-interested action is necessarily directed to objects that are anticipated to be available as a result of that action, not only understands the significance of temporality – especially the importance of the distinction between the present and the future, but also shows that once anticipation, or, more completely, imagination, is the effective mechanism for apprehending objects which actively serve self interest, then the clear distinction between self and other breaks down. It is through imagination that a person is able to form a sense of the experiences of another in sympathising with them. Self-interest and sympathy, therefore, have the same cause according to Hazlitt (1805: 68), namely the operation of imagination: ‘The imagination, by means of which alone I can anticipate future objects, or be interested in them, must carry me out of myself into the feelings of others by one and the same process by which I am thrown forward as it were into my future being, and interested in it’ (Hazlitt 1805: 3; see also 117). In this sense an individual’s future self is as remote from them as they are from any other self. This conclusion is counter intuitive and apparently contradicts experience. It also reverses the egoistic argument that sympathy is self interested in providing satisfaction to the sympathizer.

The idea, that a person’s future self stands in the same relation to their present self as does any other person, Hazlitt acknowledged, contradicts ‘one of the most deeply rooted feelings of the human mind’, namely that a person has an ‘absolute’ interest in ‘promoting [their] own welfare by all the means in [their] power’ whereas the interest taken ‘in the welfare of others is a voluntary interest, taken up and dismissed at pleasure’ (Hazlitt 1805: 26-7). But such ‘deeply rooted feelings’ are the result of a linguistic confusion, according to Hazlitt, which supports an imaginative projection of a present sense of self into the future. Before considering Hazlitt’s argument concerning this alleged confusion, which will be discussed in the following section, it is necessary to examine his treatment of the radical separation of present from future self, which consists of an argument concerning the constitution of the self and also a report of a thought experiment, each of which shall be treated in turn.
While the notion of continuous personal identity is the accepted convention there is also acceptance of the idea that the ‘elementary principle’, in which continuous identity is supposed to be located, is ‘perpetually changing’ (Hazlitt 1805: 84-5). Hazlitt notes that alterations in the external environment as well as shifts in a person’s thoughts, feelings and motives all contribute to changes in that person, so that ‘the individual is never the same for two moments together’ (Hazlitt 1805: 85). The significance of this latter fact is frequently lost, however, because of a tendency to emphasize one aspect of individuality at the expense of another. Individuality, according to Hazlitt, expresses both a distinction between one individual and another, but also a relation of that individual with him or herself (Hazlitt 1805: 95). Hazlitt argues that the second element is typically ignored because a person’s ‘present existence [is compared] with the present existence of others, and his continued existence [is compared] with the continued existence of others’ (Hazlitt 1805: 96). So while there is no confusion that a person is not the ‘same at twenty that he is at sixty’, there is nevertheless a sense that there can be a ‘general idea of him [which] includes both these extremes’ (Hazlitt 1805: 96). In reality, all individuals are aggregates, says Hazlitt, ‘and aggregates of dissimilar things’ (Hazlitt 1805: 97). The principal question in this case is not how one person can be distinguished from another but how dissimilar things might be brought together in the conceptualization of a single individual (Hazlitt 1805: 97-8).

Hazlitt’s notion of self identity is decidedly physical. Experience of sensation and feeling, Hazlitt says, ‘leave behind them certain traces, or representations of themselves retaining the same properties, and having the same immediate connection with the conscious principle’ (Hazlitt 1805: 113). No other individual can share these ‘traces’ and they therefore distinguish one person from another. But future events and feelings cannot leave such traces: ‘It is absurd to suppose that the feelings which I am to have hereafter should excite certain correspondent impressions, or presentiments of themselves before they exist, or act mechanically upon my mind by a secret sympathy’ (Hazlitt 1805: 113). A person can only go beyond their present being and have an interest in their future being ‘in the same sense and manner’, Hazlitt says, in which an individual can enter the thoughts and feelings of another, namely through use of imagination (Hazlitt 1805: 113-4). This is because there is no means whereby an individual can have the ‘same sort of connection with his future being that he has with his past, or that reflects the impressions of his future feelings backwards with the same kind of consciousness that his past feelings are transmitted forward through the channels of memory’ (Hazlitt 1805: 114; see also 139-40).

The force of these arguments is reinforced through a thought experiment. Hazlitt notes that what is required to provide a person with ‘an immediate interest in whatever relates to [their] future welfare’ and makes them ‘at all times accountable’ to themselves for their own conduct is ‘continued consciousness of [their] own feelings’ (Hazlitt 1805: 135). It is not inconceivable, Hazlitt speculates, that such psychological continuity might be subject to manipulation. Think of a situation, he says, in which some deity produces a number of beings all with an identical consciousness. In the event of such an unlikely prospect Hazlitt wishes to know: can a person with the same consciousness regard the others as equally him or herself? Would such a person be equally interested in the fate of the others? Finally, if a person were to select one of the others as ‘another’ self, what should determine their choice? (Hazlitt 1805: 136). The answer to these questions is clear: personal identity is no more transitive between these paradoxically separate but identical consciousnesses than self regard or concern, and there can be no meaningful basis of selection between them. As Hazlitt says: ‘It is plain as this conscious being may be decompounded, entirely destroyed, renewed again, or multiplied in a great number of beings, and as, whichever of these takes place, it cannot produce the least alteration in my present being, that what I am does not depend on what I am to be, and that there is no communication between my future interests, and the motives by
which my present conduct must be governed’ (Hazlitt 1805: 138-9). No connection exists, or could exist, between a person’s present and future self. ‘I am what I am’, says Hazlitt, ‘in spite of the future’ (Hazlitt 1805: 139).

**Linguistic confusion and projection in selfhood.**

It was noted above that a linguistic confusion, according to Hazlitt, supports the imaginative projection of a present into a future self. Indeed, he is unequivocal that while it is possible to understand that a person must be ‘necessarily interested in his own actual feelings’ it ‘cannot [be] conceive[d] how such an interest can be claimed where there are no such feelings (Hazlitt 1805: 5-6). The only explanation, Hazlitt says, is that ‘this kind of reasoning ... [is] founded in a mere *play of words*’ (Hazlitt 1805: 6; emphasis added). In particular, the supposition that the mind has a common and absolute interest in its past, present and future feelings, arises from the fact that these ‘are all comprehended under the same word, *self*’ (Hazlitt 1805: 7; emphasis in original). The importance of the application of the same word for different entities, those experienced as well as those imagined, is that the ‘nominal abstraction’ becomes an ‘artificial medium’ channelling into a common centre the objects of real feelings of interest along with imagined objects of future feelings (Hazlitt 1805: 119). The outcome of this linguistic inflation, Hazlitt says, ‘is a natural deception’ (Hazlitt 1805: 63).

Although Hazlitt indicates at one point that the conflation of a present with a future self springs from ‘one of the most deeply rooted feelings of the human mind’ (Hazlitt 1805: 26), his more complete statement regarding the linguistic confusion at its source implicitly provides historical and cultural contextualization. While the idea of a distinction between individualistic and collectivistic societies is firmly located in the traditions of classical sociology and treated in diverse subsequent literatures in both sociology and anthropology, Hazlitt’s account of individualized self interest in terms of it being an aspect of linguistic development grounds the phenomenon in a particular time and setting. Indeed, the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* dates modern usage of the terms ‘self’ to the late sixteenth and early seventeen centuries. Certainly Hazlitt’s argument that the modern notion of self, as continuous consciousness, derives from a particular ‘nominal abstraction’, supports the aphorism that ‘revolutions begin in dictionaries’ (Buchanan 1979: 26). Because this historically situated notion of the self includes an idea of ‘extended consciousness’ which, while justified in connecting past and present experiences, is stretched unreasonably to include anticipations of a future self (Hazlitt 1805: 11), the theory of self interest which follows from it and which supports an atomistic and asocial image of the individual can be shown to be flawed at its inception.

The inclination of persons to extend or project themselves forward in time, through an assimilation of a future self into their present being, requires a single term or word – *self* – which provides the nominal connection between these distinct states that Hazlitt shows is in reality not possible. But the linguistic vehicle which he describes Hazlitt shows is driven by a certain type of experience, namely the continued consciousness a person has of their past impressions in the present. From the standpoint of the past this continued consciousness does indeed extend to the future of the current present: ‘As our actual being is constantly passing into our future being, and carries this internal feeling of consciousness along with it, we seem to be already identified with our future being in that permanent part of our nature, and to feel by anticipation the same sort of necessary sympathy with our future selves, that we know we shall have with our past selves’ (Hazlitt 1805: 118). Because imagination can change the order of things (Hazlitt 1805: 76-7), anticipated feelings are given ‘a connection with my present feelings which they can never have’ (Hazlitt 1805: 119). Imagined objects cannot produce a sensory, mechanical or embodied feeling and a corresponding interest. They can
produce only imagined feelings, as a person imagines the feelings of another when in sympathy with them. So it is through a verbal trick that we ‘feel by anticipation the same sort of necessary sympathy with our future selves’, according to Hazlitt (Hazlitt 1805: 118).

**Experience of self interest: vitality of self experience.**

Everything that we have seen Hazlitt argue up to this point restates and amplifies the proposition he set out in the first sentence of *Principles*: ‘the human mind ... is naturally interested in the welfare of others in the same way, and from the same direct motives, by which it is impelled to the pursuit of our own interest’ (Hazlitt 1805: 1; emphasis added). Persons anticipate or imagine rather than directly feel the objects of their future welfare in the same way that they imagine the feelings and interests of others. And yet, according to Hazlitt, through a trick of language the idea persists that it is not mere sympathy with their future selves that people experience but an extension of continuous consciousness of self into the as yet unrealized future. But it is more than simply ‘nominal abstraction’ (Hazlitt 1805: 119) which leads to such a situation because while self-interested action and interest in another have the same basis they are different in the degree to which the respective sympathies, for future self and other, are experienced. This qualification of Hazlitt’s general argument indicates why the linguistic confusion he describes succeeds in promoting the outcome he identifies.

In explaining the ‘origin and growth of our selfish feelings’ Hazlitt shows that while there is ‘no essential difference [in kind] between the motives by which I am impelled to the pursuit of my own good and those by which I am impelled to pursue the good of others ... there is one of degree’ (Hazlitt 1805: 121). This consideration, he says, is additional to the ‘arbitrary association of ideas’ resulting from verbal confusion and is in fact the ‘principal’ factor in accounting for feelings of self interest over and against the interests of others. The idea of a person’s own good must be ‘sufficiently warm and vivid to excite in [them] an emotion of interest’ (Hazlitt 1805: 33) and the degree of warmth and vividness will vary with closeness to the subject: ‘I know better what my future feelings will be’, says Hazlitt, than ‘what those of others will be in the like case’ (Hazlitt 1805: 121). The mechanism most responsible for the difference identified by Hazlitt is memory, through which imagination of future experiences is not merely enabled but vitalized by recollection of previous impressions and sensations (Hazlitt 1805: 121-2). But a person can only imagine the memory of another (Hazlitt 1805: 122). This is not an entirely satisfactory explanation of the fact that one’s sympathy with immediate family and close friends is stronger than it is with strangers. Hazlitt invokes a second factor, therefore, in addition to memory, to account for this phenomenon.

A person ‘must be employed more continually in providing for his own wants and pleasures than those of others’, Hazlitt says, and is similarly ‘employed in providing for the immediate welfare of [their] family and connections much more than in providing for the welfare of others’ (Hazlitt 1805: 123). These activities and the cost they incur are effectively an emotional investment, Hazlitt suggests, in the interests of those to whom they are directed (Hazlitt 1805: 123-4). The further that another is removed from these activities, the lower the degree of sympathy the generator of such activities can experience for them. Hazlitt is careful to point out that his argument concerning the higher degree in the warmth of regard for a person’s self-interested actions relative to the interests of others is not a return to the argument of egoistic self interest he opposes. The higher degree of sympathy for others closer to rather than remote from a person results not from that person receiving more from the closer than the more distant (which would satisfy egoistic self interest), but rather from the higher provision or sacrifice made to the closer than the further (Hazlitt 1805: 124). This anticipates Sen’s notion of ‘commitment’, mentioned above, but with an added psychological insight concerning the motivational power of a prior sacrifice. More generally, Hazlitt says
that ‘the strong and uneasy attachment to self’ is not the result of ‘an exclusive feeling of self interest’ but rather of processes of memory and attention which affect the vividness of the sense of self and which therefore may be attenuated by contrasting processes (Hazlitt 1805: 122).

Embodied self and desire.

One set of experiences that seem to contradict Hazlitt’s argument concerning the attention to future self interest as an act of sympathetic imagination are those associated with the satisfaction of the physical appetites. This is because, as Hazlitt acknowledges, they tend ‘to the gratification of the individual and at the same time refer to some future or imaginary object as the source of this gratification ... [they] impel the mind in a selfish direction’ (Hazlitt 1805: 125). In discussing bodily drives Hazlitt makes a distinction between ‘purely physical or ... instinctive’ appetites and those in which the satisfaction of a bodily feeling requires an ‘idea of that which will heighten and gratify its susceptibility’ of pleasure or removal of pain (Hazlitt 1805: 126). These latter appetites, Hazlitt says, ‘may be accounted for consistently enough with the foregoing hypothesis’ (Hazlitt 1805: 126). It is necessary, then, to consider Hazlitt’s argument concerning the structure of imagination in self-interested actions to satisfy physical dispositions.

An instance of a purely physical appetite is raw hunger. In this case, Hazlitt says, the physiological processes draw upon other bodily systems in unyieldingly seeking the body’s relief, which, secondly, will not abate but continue to grow ‘the longer the relief which it requires is withheld from it’ (Hazlitt 1805: 127). Such an appetite cannot be dissuaded or diminished by efforts of will or other-directed activity: a person experiencing unrelieved hunger is eventually ‘incapable of attending to any thing but the violence of [their] own sensations, or the means of alleviating them’ (Hazlitt 1805: 128). But hunger is not necessarily the archetypical form of physical appetite. Indeed, Hazlitt’s discussion of what he calls the sexual appetite shows how appropriate is his account of sympathy, anticipation or imagination in explaining the arousal and gratification of this physical and self-satisfying imperative.

Such ‘mere appetite’ as the sexual interest, Hazlitt contends, ‘is but the fragment of a self-moving machine, a subordinate instrument even in the accomplishment of its own purposes; that it does little or nothing without the aid of another faculty to inform and direct it’ (Hazlitt 1805: 129). In particular, ‘the gratification of [sexual] passion in another is the means of gratifying our own, that our physical sensibility stimulates our sympathy with the desires of the other sex, and on the other hand this feeling of mutual sympathy increases the physical desires of both’ (Hazlitt 1805: 128-9). Thus the ‘chief foundation of the sexual passion’ Hazlitt shows is the anticipatory or imaginative sympathy with the other’s desire (Hazlitt 1805: 129), so that physical desire is mediated by other-directed sympathy and the seemingly self-interested sexual drive is stimulated and consummated through mental and reciprocal imaginative capacities. This is a successful reversal of the idea that bodily appetites are inherently selfish when it is shown that they depend instead on ‘mutual sympathy’ and have a socially reciprocal and not a narrowly egoistical foundation. Hazlitt later developed this argument in a highly critical discussion of Thomas Malthus’ claims regarding the consequences for population growth of what he saw as the uncontrollable sexual appetite of the poor (Hazlitt 1807: 123-231).

Hazlitt does not claim that physical desires are simply constructions of imagination. He says that it is important to distinguish between an appetite and its gratification (Hazlitt 1805: 129-30). It is not the ‘mere physical uneasiness’ of the appetite, but the ‘indirect result of its communication to the thinking or imaginative principle’ in its satisfaction or gratification, that the faculties of other interestedness as opposed to mere self interestedness
operate (Hazlitt 1805: 130). But even a focus on physical appetites *sui generis* offers no support to the conception of a direct and immediately meaningful self interest, as in the egoistic philosophy that Hazlitt opposes. Hazlitt says that, on the contrary, physical desire may often lead to ‘actions contrary to our own well-known, clear and lasting interest’ (Hazlitt 1805: 131). He mentions addiction to alcohol as a case in point and in this context refers again to the ‘sexual appetite’ (Hazlitt 1805: 131, 132). These and similar notionally or narrowly self-interested desires are capable of being ‘a perpetual clog and dead-weight upon the reason’ and therefore frustrate rather than realize reasonable individual welfare (Hazlitt 1805: 132). A more recent literature discusses these themes as weakness of will and also possible contradictions between short- and long-term interests (Ainslie 1986) that would lend further sophistication to Hazlitt’s argument. These distinctions support Hazlitt’s treatment of self interest as a complex even contradictory term serving a particular theoretical purpose rather than being experientially founded or referring to a directly accessible phenomenon of immediate sense or appeal.

**Self reflection and the looking-glass self.**

We have seen Hazlitt argue that human action is disinterested in the sense that a person’s interest in their future welfare is of the same form and quality as their interest in another’s welfare because both are founded on anticipatory or imaginative sympathy. This proposition and the discussion which supports it operate in terms of a particular understanding of the self, a number of aspects of which have been outlined in the preceding account. These insights concerning the temporality of the self, its physicality, its capacity for imagination and therefore reason, can now be situated in Hazlitt’s more general understanding of the origin of the self.

It was indicated at several points of the discussion above that the body, for Hazlitt, is a necessary element in the individuality of persons, but it is not sufficient. The ‘material substance’ provides the means whereby sensory impressions and experience are registered in consciousness (Hazlitt 1805: 105-6) because the ‘body is necessarily the instrument by which these sensations are conveyed to the mind’ and its physicality is therefore the conduit promoting the uniqueness or individuality of experience which cannot be registered ‘on the bodies of others’ (Hazlitt 1805: 107). But the body as the object of another’s gaze, on the other hand, cannot be the source of a person’s individuality because it cannot ‘convey ... the idea of [one’s] personality any more than that of any one else’ (Hazlitt 1805: 106). The importance of the body in self formation, therefore, is that it is the frame within which consciousness is located, according to Hazlitt.

Self identity is achieved when an individual acquires an awareness or consciousness of themselves as a person. Hazlitt says that this ‘relation of a thinking being to itself’ arises through a person having a ‘consciousness of what passes in [their] own mind’ (Hazlitt 1805: 104). But it is not essentially the content of the thoughts in question that matters so much as the capacity or ability of a person to reflect on, think about or be conscious of their own thoughts: ‘the power of perceiving that you are and what you are from the immediate reflection of the mind on its own operations, sensations or ideas’ (Hazlitt 1805: 105). While this statement appears to suggest a solipsistic self Hazlitt explicitly warns against such a view because the ability to form a self identity necessarily requires knowledge of others:

It is by comparing the knowledge that I have of my own impressions, ideas, feelings, powers, etc with my knowledge of the same or similar impressions, ideas, etc in others, and with the still more imperfect conception that I form of what passes in their minds when this is supposed to be essentially different from what passes in my own, that I acquire the general notion of self (Hazlitt 1805: 108).
This formulation anticipates the conception of the self in early twentieth-century sociological social psychology, which focuses on trans-subjectivity as means to the formation of self, and which occurs principally through a sense of the awareness and especially the evaluations of others. In particular is the idea in George Herbert Mead of role taking, in which the self has social agency through its capacity to anticipate the intentions of others (Mead 1934: 254), and Charles Horton Cooley’s concept of a looking-glass self, in which an individual’s self-evaluation and self-feeling derives from their apprehension of how others perceive and assess them (Cooley 1964: 184-5).

The similarity here between Hazlitt and early twentieth-century American sociology is largely a consequence of their drawing on a common source, namely Adam Smith’s *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759). Although Cooley fails to acknowledge Smith’s earlier account of a looking-glass self, later writers have recognized the connection between them (Barbalet 2001: 108; Coser 1977: 350-1; Merton 1968: 19 note; Strasser 1976: 47-8). As Hazlitt drew from this same work it is important to look a little closer at his debt to and distinction from Smith. Hazlitt’s argument concerning the anticipatory nature and therefore the imaginative component of self-interested action can properly be seen as an extension of Smith’s account of sympathy in *Moral Sentiments*. Sympathy, Smith says, is based on imagination: ‘As we have no immediate experience of what other men feel ... it is by the imagination only that we can form any conception of what are his sensations’ (Smith 1759: 9). The imaginative element of sympathy is also central in Smith’s discussion of self formation. As we have seen above, Hazlitt does not disagree with the idea in Smith that the scrutiny of others is ‘the only looking-glass by which we can, in some measure ... scrutinize the propriety of our own conduct’ (Smith 1759: 112). Imagination is central here also because it is only by ‘suppos[ing] ourselves the spectators of our own behaviour’ that we can ‘imagine what effect it would ... produce upon us’ (Smith 1759: 112). But Hazlitt goes beyond these conclusions.

The looking-glass self entails a social determination of individual identity. Given that persons have an interest in how they are regarded by others, as Smith shows, Hazlitt adds the elements of experience which both accommodate to but also resist or transform the looking-glass imperative. Hazlitt describes a self forming reflexivity that is central to ‘the peculiar connection which subsists between the different faculties and perceptions of the same conscious being, constituted as man is, so that as the subject of his own reflection or consciousness the same things impressed on any of his faculties produce a quite different effect upon him from what they would do if they were impressed in the same way on any other being’ (Hazlitt 1805: 104-5; emphasis in original). This construction of identity raises questions that Smith does not pose, concerning the fundamental differences between a person’s present and future identities and therefore the distinct nature of and different means of their apprehending their present and future welfare. Smith is disinclined to effectively embark on Hazlitt’s more expansive inquiry because he subscribes sufficiently to the egoistic position Hazlitt opposes. It is asserted in the opening sentence of *Moral Sentiments* that while persons are not selfish in so far as they have an ‘interest ... in the fortune of others’, that sympathetic interest is nevertheless maintained by ‘the pleasure of seeing it’ (Smith 1759: 9), that is to say, through the satisfaction it gives to the sympathizer. By rejecting the idea that sympathy for others reduces to egoistic self interest Hazlitt was able to develop a number of essential arguments that continue to be significant and also novel because largely absent from current social science discussion.

Conclusion.
While Hazlitt’s *An Essay on the Principles of Human Action* remains unknown in sociology, the recovery of its argument is not chiefly a contribution to the history of ideas so much as a
belated restatement of an important theoretical contribution to action theory, the significance of which is not simply in its intrinsic value but in the fact that it remains a unique presentation of the argument. In concluding the present discussion of Hazlitt’s analysis of self-interested action, therefore, it shall be indicated what it adds to sociological theory. Two issues in particular are highlighted here: a construction of sociality that preserves the integrity of action theory, and a more fine-pointed understanding of the self and its transformation through action.

It was suggested above that sociological critiques of the notion of self interest in particular and homo economicus in general have tended to undermine action theory. The idea of ‘embeddedness’, for instance, removes the concepts of choice and intentionality – necessary for action theory – from understandings of behaviour, by emphasizing the linkages between actors and which instead determine the direction and quality of an individual’s orientation. Indeed, structural accounts (including network analysis) function in terms of how persons are locked into relationships so that opportunities for individual choice and prerogative are so heuristically reduced as to be effectively eliminated. Institutional and cultural accounts, in which the action of individuals is modelled in terms of overarching norms and values, similarly tends to undermine action theory’s requirement of the capacities of persons to choose between options and to select and develop the resources they command. Hazlitt’s argument, however, provides a forceful account of sociality that requires neither structure nor norms and does not depreciate but is founded on action theoretic premises. By showing that the objects of self-interested actions are known to the actor through the same means by which they know the welfare of another, namely the imagination, the distinction between self and other is significantly reduced and an account of disinterestedness or sociality projected from both the temporal disjuncture inherent in action and the consequences of temporality for an actor’s future self interest and present other-interestedness.

Because it emphasizes action, the wilful production of a future event, Hazlitt’s argument highlights change and variability. Standard sociological theory is not averse to appreciation of the significance and incidence of change, of course, but what is typically regarded as subject to change is limited in so far as it is largely assumed that action realizes outcomes external to the actor and that an actor’s given interests and identity are stable through the action and consolidated by it. Thus an (implicit) assumption operates which holds that in action certain means are mobilized to achieve the satisfaction of an unchanging interest. Case studies, on the other hand, frequently demonstrate the ways in which action transforms the interests and therefore the identity of those who engage in it. Hazlitt’s discussion is singular in providing a foundational theoretical account of the unavoidable or necessary change in the actor’s identity through self-interested action. The concept of self interest raises many questions including those of choice, trans-subjectivity and temporality, about which sociological theory has much to say. Hazlitt’s general contribution to action theory is to demonstrate that the notion of an actor requires a concept of an interior self, and to provide a consistent explanation of its phases and dynamism that goes beyond what is presently understood.

References.
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