Comparison of Descartes's and Hume's Ideas of the Self

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Abstract: The Father of Modernity, Rene Descartes (1596-1650), has been labeled as such because of the focus he gave to man, straying away from the trend of thought preceding his time which was theocentric. Through a very systematic method, he arrived at the certainty of the existence of the cogito—the 'self'—which he used as the starting point in his philosophy, claiming it to be that which he is most certain of. After some years comes the Scottish philosopher, David Hume (1711-1776), debunking Descartes confidence in his first certitude saying that the 'self' per se does not really exist. This paper aims to compare the ideas of the Self of two of the greatest thinkers of the Modern Period. This will be done by expounding both philosophers' ideas and thereafter converging their ideas in comparison and contrast. I shall exhaust different sources, both primary and secondary, to find information on this matter.

Keywords: Descartes, Hume, Self

"Who am I?"

In at least one point in our lives, we get to ask ourselves this question. In a speech delivered by John Jacob Scherer, he compared this with a ladder leaned on a wall., it is when we come to realize that we are bounded in the constantly-running time—that we are moving towards our end. Yet, we cannot still be certain of how we would want our lives to be before we leave this world. He says, "A mid-life crisis is when you get to the top rung of your ladder only to realize that you leaned it against the wrong wall."[1] This realization is brought about by that question—"who am I?"

The question of "who" is the question of the identity of the inquirer. It can either be as superficial as the mere name, or as deep as the being and purposes in life of the person being asked. Whatever this question begs the person is a characteristic or a property of that person. The questioning of the properties of an object is a presupposition of the object's existence. Hence, the question, "Who am I?" presupposes the existence of the *I*.[2]

In this paper, I shall present a discourse on the notions of the *I* in the Modern Period, particularly that of Rene Descartes and David Hume. I find these philosophers' ideas of the *I* contradicting, and hence find it interesting for both of their beliefs of the self be put in a dialogue. For Descartes, I shall begin my discussion with his methodic doubt and the transition of his thought to his first certitude that is the existence of the *cogito*. Meanwhile, for Hume, I shall briefly discuss first the bases of his empiricist thought to found my exploration of his notion of the *identity*. After these explications, I shall put their ideas side by side

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on some specific topics that are pertinent to the intent of this paper for comparison and/or contrast. It should be expected for some points discussed in the two former parts to be repeated in this part of the paper for emphasis of argument.

Descartes's Cogito

The shift from the theocentric thought in the Medieval Ages can greatly be contributed to the rise of the anthropocentric trend kindled by the philosophy of René Descartes, making him the Father of Modernity. The precursors of his philosophy include Francis Bacon, Nicolas of Cusa, and Galileo Galilei. Indeed, Descartes exemplifies the then concept of the new scientific man.

Descartes started his line of thought by emptying his mind of everything that it contains. He aimed at certainty. To reach that, he knew that he should, first and foremost, consider as false all of his existing knowledge. In his first principle he stated that, "in order to seek truth, it is necessary once in the course of our life, to doubt, as far as possible, of all things."[3] His desire to found his entire system of knowledge on a solid ground involves him in foundationalism. This begins the pursuit of knowledge with self-evident beliefs which do not depend on any other knowledge but rather, can justify the rest of what we know.[4] We cannot arrive at the truth if we start at a wrong point in our journey towards it, in the same way that we cannot reach a certain destination if the route that we are following is unsure. We can keep on turning left or right in the entire duration of our whole journey but we can never arrive at our destination when we do not know the directions to it, even if we travel to reach it for our whole life.

Hence, Descartes, in his pursuit of certainty, doubted all that he knows. This is his famous methodic doubt.[5] He considered everything whose source is either the senses or the intellect as false. For, countless are the moments that he is being deceived by the senses, or those that he thought to be real but are really just in his dreams. Furthermore, it is possible that for all he knows, he might have just been deceived by an evil genius all along.[6] He saw both mentioned sources of knowledge—senses and intellect—as uncertain and cannot therefore be fully trusted to give him any certainty. This means that no knowledge can be exempted from this elimination, for, where else, except for the senses or the intellect, can knowledge come from? However, when all knowledge coming from the senses or the intellect are considered as false through doubting, we are left with nothing—no knowledge that holds certainty. At this point, Descartes exempts one thing that is, doubting itself. Whatever is occurring is necessarily existing. Therefore, while the doubting or the thinking is taking place, it necessarily exists. This is what is called occurrent existence.[7] Doubting or thinking exists, for without its existence, this entire process of methodic doubt will be nonexistent.

At this point, we have regarded as false all the existing knowledge coming from the sources that hold no certainty, i.e. the senses and the intellect, and so there is nothing left but the existence of doubting or thinking itself. The thinking, for Descartes, exists, but not substantially. Substance, in his context, is that which is taken to be as real and whose existence is independent of any other object.[8] Thinking, therefore, though proven to have an occurrent existence, does not have an independent existence. It is a property that needs a substance to be a property of.[9] We do not have an immediate knowledge or perception of the substance; we only perceive certain forms and

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qualities that we ascribe to a substance that these attributes exist in.[10] Hence, in the same way that no piano music can be heard without a piano being played, this substance that thinking is an property of necessarily exists.

This substance that thinking is an essence of is none other than the *mind*. Thus is the very famous line, "I think, therefore I am."[11] His thinking insinuates something, or rather someone that does the thinking, and thence affirms his existence. As he says,

I am nothing so long as I shall think that I am something. Thus, after everything has been most carefully weighed, it must finally be established that this pronouncement "I am, I exist" is necessarily true every time I utter it or conceive it in my mind.[12]

His existence - that was what he was very sure of; his first certitude. His *I* exists, more certainly than any other else's existence. The knowledge that inferred from thinking to existing is a kind that is a product of intuition and not of reasoning.[13] It is not a deduction from a premise because the premise—that he thinks—is self-evident, that he had simultaneously concluded his existence from it intuitively.

After providing the existence of his self as the solution to the problem of what he can hold most certain to found succeeding knowledge that he can trust to be sure of, he then inquires, "But what then am I? A thing which thinks. What is a thing which thinks? Is it a thing which doubts, understands, [conceives], affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels."[14] With Descartes saying this, some would jokingly say that he is a floating mind, alone in a vacuum.

He exists. But what is he that exists? In the process of doubting everything, he had also doubted himself, including what he is. However, he recalls what he was assumed he was before the doubt: he is a man. He went on to enumerate that he has parts—he has organs, bones, flesh, etc.,—to which he calls his body. Therefore, the mind, to which he had attributed the certainty of existence form the beginning, has something along with it to constitute a man—that something is the body. Some of the characteristics that he has ascribed to the body are (1) those which occupy a certain form—as aforementioned, this is caused by its corporeal properties. (2) What follows from this is that the body can be perceived by the senses, (3) and in return, it is also what gives us perceptions through the senses. (4) Last one is that it cannot move on its own, i. e., it needs something separate from it to drive it—this is where its connection to the mind lies.[15]

It can be inferred from these characteristics that the body is composed of corporeal attributes. Meaning, it cannot be safe from the doubt. Our senses are not infallible. I may perceive something as another and not even be aware of the mistake in my perception. Say, I may think that what I am eating right now is yoghurt when in fact; it really is just my roommate's cow milk that had gone bad. Or, for all I know, I am really just imagining eating something because I am really craving for a yoghurt, but I cannot go down to buy one because it is already three in the morning. In whichever case—either perception or imagination, the mind functions. When I eat, it is the mind that processed the information brought to it by my sense perception, concluding that I am eating yoghurt. It is the same mind that faults when I perceive wrongly of what I eat. It is also this mind that imagines that I am eating. Therefore, nothing can be brought to the understanding without the comprehension done by the mind. He goes on to say that:

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Indeed, I do not even know whether I have a body; you have shown me that it is possible to doubt it. I might add that I cannot deny absolutely that I have a body. Yet even if we keep all these suppositions intact, this will not prevent me from being certain that I exist. On the contrary, these suppositions simply strengthen the certainty of my conviction that I exist and am not a body. Otherwise, if I had doubts about my body, I would also have doubts about myself, and I cannot have doubts about that. I am absolutely convinced that I exist, so convinced that it is totally impossible for me to doubt it.[16]

It follows as well that every thought or idea resulting from the idea of the yoghurt exemplify the certainty of my existence for, the more idea I process; the more idea I process, the more I am thinking—the more I am sure that I am.

The nature of the *I* is constituted by *cogitationes* or thought. As demonstrated earlier, thinking is positing the existence of the thinking mind. Thought, as an essence, includes imagination, sensation, and will as its modes. This, being the sole function of the self has two kinds: Will, the actions of the soul, and Passion, all kinds of perceptions or thoughts. [17]

In conclusion, Rene Descartes, being the Father of Modernity that he is, spearheaded philosophy's journey of exploring the self. He did so by affirming its existence. Furthermore, he gave weight to its importance metaphysically by saying it exists and epistemologically by making it the solid foundation on which all the rest of his proceeding knowledge center on.

The certainty that Descartes holds for the existence of his *I* got a lot of approval and criticisms in the realm of philosophy following his. One of the most prominent of those who criticized his thought, specifically his notion of the self, is the Scottish, David Hume.

Hume's Personal Identity

David Hume's line of thought springs out from the empiricist tradition. He is often labeled as the most acute and consistent of the empiricists. The accounts of his stance on the 'self' or 'identity' are found in a part (IV) in a section (VI) in the first book of *A Treatise on Human Nature* and in the appendix of its third book.

Rule No. 1 in Hume's philosophy: *All knowledge is to be traced back from an impression.*[18]

Hume divided our perceptions into two classes: Thoughts or ideas and Impressions. These two are differentiated according to the force or the liveliness with which they function to give knowledge. 'Ideas' are, as he describes it, the results of the creative power of the mind through the things given to it by the sense perceptions or the impressions. Meanwhile, 'Impressions' are those vivid experiences arising from the senses.[19] As had been said in the Rule No. 1, all that we know are derived from sense experience. With this, one might ask, how come, then, can I have an idea of a unicorn when I have not perceived such in reality? This is a common refutation against empiricism. Hume would just argue that it is because we have an idea of a horse and a horn, as they came from experience, and, through our imagination, we puzzle all the pieces of knowledge together to create an image of unicorn. This reaffirms what I dubbed as his Rule no.1 as being really a Rule no. 1.

These impressions—these lively perceptions—are distinct from each other. Thus, we tend to ascribe connections between the separate perceptions through our imagination. The connections exist only in our minds for nothing

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really is connected; only conjoined.[20] When two things are connected, it means that there exists a real relationship or link between them. For example, claiming that A and B are connected is claiming that they are linked with each other; that A is interdependent to B, or vice versa. Meanwhile, to say that A and B are conjoined is to say that they are just put together; put next to each other, with no real link or relation. We associate distinct ideas through three ways: resemblance, contiguity, and causation or cause and effect.

These principles of connections are also those that we apply to our claim of an identity or the idea of the self. The impression that gives rise to the idea of the self is one that "must continue invariably the same, thro' the whole course of our lives; since self is suppos'd to exist after that manner."[21] This purports that Hume's idea of the self that which is permanent and in line with the dictionary definition of it which is the "sameness of essential or generic character in different instances." [22] Identity, then, is that thing which remains as is despite the many changes that one go through. However, Hume found it perplexing because, if we go back to our rule number one, from what impression can we trace the existence of an identity? Nothing, perhaps, argued Hume. Therefore, Hume disagrees of the dominating idea of the self and goes on to say that the so-called "self" is nothing but a *bundle* of a variety of perceptions which succeed each other with the rapidity that is impossible for us to conceive.[23] Moreover, he holds that even the slightest of change can destroy this posited identity. Thus, we are all but a fleeting moment.

Among the three principles of connections that have been mentioned, Hume held two of those as that which projects to us the illusion of an identity, i.e. resemblance and causation. (1) Resemblance does so by imposing a similitude between distinct but succeeding perceptions and thus making us think that that chain of impressions which we see are but one, unchanging identity. (2) Meanwhile, Hume explained causation as that moment when we ascribe as one impression what actually were two distinct impressions. This is a very important ingredient in our construction of the self through the connections we make is memory. As Hume precisely forwarded:

As memory alone acquaints us with the continuance and extent of this succession of perceptions, 'tis to be considered, upon that account chiefly, as the source of personal identity. Had we no memory, we never should have any notion of causation, nor consequently of that chain of causes and effects, which constitute our self or person.[24]

This explanation provided by Hume explains the whole process in which we ascribe as a self what really is but a bundle of impressions operates in our imagination. He elaborated in this quotation the importance of memory in our formulation of an account of causation and thus, of personal identity.

We cannot be, in our waking state, without a perception—not even for a single moment. Our perceptions, as Donald Baxter explains it, are those that are objects of our direct awareness, be it sensory or anything else.[25] Perceptions are constantly changing but the interruptions or the successions from one point to another are so little that we do not notice it. Changes can make something appear differently to our senses. However, if these changes are not great enough a proportion to the whole, it cannot really be noticed. And therefore, the interruptions will fail to make that object appear differently. Following this is the illusion of consistency and identity are projected.

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Another possibility that he explored, is that although changes may be great (as proportioned to the whole of the object), it still is not as apparent because they appear so gradually—little by little, making a difference that we could not even notice it occurring. We will just then become aware of what change took place when we are able to compare the object from its starting point to its latest point. An example of this is when you see yourself in a picture from ten years ago. You see how vastly you have changed; how greatly you have grown. Maybe, you wished you still look as young, or thanked the heavens that you do not look like that anymore. Perhaps, you would not even believe that you once looked like that! However, when you are taken back to that moment when the said picture of you was taken, you could not even have imagined how things would change ten years from that moment; that a decade ago, you did not even have the slightest idea that you would end up being at this moment in the present.

We are all familiar with this feeling. And this is what Hume questioned. That, despite the vast changes in the body or the physical make up of an object or a person, we still tend to attribute to them a single and constant identity that we had ten minutes or ten centuries ago. Hume explained:

[W]e may farther observe, that where we do not give rise to such a fiction, our propension to confound identity with relation is so great, that we are apt to imagine something unknown and mysterious, connecting the parts, beside their relation; and this I take to be the case with regard to the identity we ascribe to plants and vegetables. And even when this does not take place, we still feel a propensity to confound these ideas, tho' we are not able fully to satisfy ourselves in that particular, nor find any thing invariable and uninterrupted to justify our notion of identity. [26]

Meaning to say, he purported that our ascription of identity to a person, as it is but the same kind as that which we do to plants or animals, is for our own convenience; for the sake of keeping to ourselves a simple idea with which we can easily remember or think of an object.

In a nutshell, Hume thought that our conventional idea of a personal identity is fictitious for we are, for him, but a 'bundle' of several distinct impressions that just so happened to be at the same location at the same time creating an illusion that they are all one and the same. Alas, Hume concludes, "the question concerning the substance of the soul is absolutely unintelligible."[27]

Comparison

As the accounts of the self or personal identity of the two philosophers at hand have been established, I shall now compare their philosophies. The comparison that I am attempting to make is one that will consider the aspects of their accounts with similarities and differences, and trace down what could have caused them.

The weight that Descartes had given the mind has inevitably caused his successors to give as much importance to the discussion of the mind. The two main schools of thought that arose from his innovation are the Rationalist and the Empiricist School. He is classified under the former because of his distrust to how the body (i.e., the senses) perceives without the mind. However, I would like to believe that there is a slight hint of empiricism in the philosophy of Descartes because the methodic doubt that he so believes in depends on ones experience of it.

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Meaning, its effectiveness is only based upon the personal experience of the person to it. On the contrary, Hume, as had been mentioned, is of the best empiricists there is. That fact can be upheld without any contest. He was faithful in following the empiricist tradition.

The distinction of their thoughts starts from their approach to thinking. Descartes dwelled on what exists. His attempt to the advancement of knowledge only comes after his discovery of where it could found on. He aimed at discovering an indubitable truth, which he did through the methodic doubt. At the conclusion of his doubt, he realized that he thinks, and therefore he is—that he exists. The action, that is thinking, is impossible to be without an actor. This actor that he sees is a substance—the cogito. His necessitation of a substance to be behind the essence proves his claim of its existence to be a metaphysical one. That, there needs to be *something* to justify the action. It can therefore be concluded that his approach to it is tending toward a metaphysical one.

On the other hand, Hume's main agenda was to advance our understanding on the acquisition of knowledge. He even applied this to his notion of the understanding the self. He holds that the kind of self that Descartes and those others who claim it as something substantial is but a fabrication of our mind. For him, the self is not a matter of what exists or not but rather, of the impossibility of knowing something that constant that is the identity of a person. Many interpretations of Hume mistake his account in the "Of Personal Identity" as an attempt to explain affirmatively what it is that we have in an existing 'identity'. But, in reality, Hume devoted his effort in this particular chapter in denying such possibility. Hence, this account is, in truth, but a negative explanation of the possibility of knowing the *self*. Hence, we can say that his approach is epistemic. Epistemic in a sense that he is concerned with what we are capable to know; with what we *can* know.

Their accounts of the self—the affirmation and the denial, for that matter—pertain to the Classical notion of a substance. This is the unchanging stuff that holds its constantly-changing properties together. In those Ancient times, the discussion of it is universe or world-scale. These two, however, reduced the discussion to the substance of a person. Descartes faithfully followed this tradition. The idea that there must be something underneath in order to support what will come above that comes from the Ancient pursuit of the 'urstoff' or the ultimate stuff. This became his presupposition to his pursuit of the one immutable truth. It is as though demonstrating through the usual pyramid wherein there is a base which founds the ascent to the one thing on top, but inverted.[28] In Descartes's demonstration, the world that is filled with complexities should have bedrock from which it can base its certainty.

This, of course, goes on differently in Hume's account. His is more of like lego pieces which are distinct and originally separated from each other. If a kid assembles it—put together different pieces, different colors—and show it to you, saying that it is something, say, a house, you would tend to agree to it, when in fact, you know for yourself that those are just lego pieces stuck together in a manner that would 'look' like a house! The lego pieces being talked of on the said example are the perceptions that bundle together to create an illusion that there exists a single, unchanging identity. Without these lego pieces, there cannot be any house or figure created. Similarly, in the absence of perceptions, we cannot make any conclusion of a self. However, as Hume argues, we can never be without a perception, in our waking state.

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Therefore, when in a deep sleep, for all we know, we might even cease to exist!

Alan Tom have, in his article correlating the notions of the self of Descartes and Hume to that of the Buddha, dubbed Descartes's cogito as a "robust *I*."[29] This description of the mind is very insightful for it is very much along with the Cartesian doctrine. The mind in this notion is immensely active. Aside from it being the source of existence, it is also the basis of all the succeeding knowledge that I can attain. Contrary to this is Hume's I, which, in probably its shortest explanation, is non-existent.

Conclusion

The pursuit of the self in the question of "Who am I?" was taken differently by Descartes and Hume. From a mere existential conundrum whose answer is immensely searched for by us in at least once in our lives, these two elevated it to a metaphysical and an epistemological one, consequently. From searching for our purpose in life, they have asked whether it is possible to know it.

The tradition of thinking spearheaded by Descartes has opened so many doors in raising different essential questions that had consequently triggered different stances from different standpoints. All of which are to be given merits for the prowess of argumentation that they have shown. As had been discussed in this paper, one of which is David Hume, whose philosophy, for many, exemplifies the essence of the empiricist thought.

I would like to end this paper by differentiating once more the view on the self of the two philosophers at hand by stating their thought from my own point of view:

Descartes. "I think, therefore I am." Thinking is an action. The fact that there is an action being done affirms an actor. Thinking, then, presupposes the existence of a thinker—a mind. The mind is the substance to which thinking is the essence of. I am my mind. I exist. This, now, I can be sure of. To say otherwise is still an affirmation of my existence for to do so is still thinking. Indeed, I exist!

Hume. The *I* does not exist. In fact, it would even be invalid to say "I," for it would be presumptuous of me to say so. I do not exist as a single unit of being, for I am but an aggregate—a compound—of several different perceptions. The perceptions that compose me are in a constant flux and therefore I am not the same as I was one millisecond ago. If you point into my direction, you are not really pointing at something. I am but a fleeting moment.

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[1] John Jacob Scherer, Commencement Speech to Roanoke College Graduates, in *Graduation Wisdom*, NA, Accessed December 1, 2015, http://www.graduationwisdom.com/speeches/0053-scherer.htm.

[2] Also called *cogito*, *mind* or *self*, *identity,* or in a more religious context, *soul.* (All the I's in italics in this paper from here onwards shall be taken as synonymous to self).

[3] Rene Descartes, *Selections from the Principles of Philosophy,* Translated by John Veitch, PDF File, Accessed from Project Gutenberg, 15.

[4] Peter Markie, The Cogito and Its Importance, in *The Cambridge Companion to Descartes,* ed. by John Cottingham (Cambridge University Press, 1992), 51.

[5] It is worth noting that the methodic doubt is subjective, that is, it comes from a first hand experience. That, even if he proclaim with conviction what this method will end up to, i. e. finding the certainty of the existence of the self, he still encourages everyone to do it on their own for it will be in their personal experience that they will find the value and the authenticity of the method.

[6] René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy", in *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, trans. by Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianopolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006).

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[7] C. G. Prado, *Starting with Descartes* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009, 67-69).

[8] On the latter part of his *Meditations*, he will reveal that as beings created by God, we cannot be fully independent of God's creating and sustaining will. Therefore, we are substances whose existence is free from any other thing except for God. See Prado, *Starting With Descartes*, 10-11.

[9] *Ibid.,* 11.

[10] René Descartes, "Reply to Objection IV," in *The Philosophical Works of Descartes,* Vol. 2, trans. Elizabeth Haldane and G.R.T. Ross (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1967), 98.

[11] Descartes, *Meditations*,

[12] René Descartes, "Meditations on First Philosophy," in *Meditations, Objections, and Replies*, trans. by Roger Ariew and Donald Cress (Indianopolis: Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2006), 13.

[13] Peter Markie, *The Cogito and Its Importance*, 55.

[14] Descartes, *Meditations*, 10.

[15] Descartes, *Meditations*, 9.

[16] *Ibid*., 52.

[17] E. Rhodes, "A View of the Philosophy of Descartes." in *The Journal of Speculative Philosophy,* Vol. 18, No. 3., July 1884, Accessed from JSTOR. 229, 233.

[18] Emphasis mine. Hume has made clear this condition for the acquisition of knowledge and furthers it in the latter part of the same section saying: "When we entertain, therefore, any suspicion that a philosophical term is employed without any meaning or idea (as is but too frequent), we need but enquire, *from what impression is that supposed idea derived?* And if it be impossible to assign any, this will serve to confirm our suspicion." David Hume, *Enquiries Concerning the Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals, 2nd edition,* trans. by L. A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1902) in Section II*,* 19.

[19] David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature,* trans. by L.A. Selby-Bigge (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1896), 50.

[20] *Enquiries*, Section VI, Part III, 76.

[21] *Treatise*, Section VI, 133.

[22] Merriam-Webster Dictionary

[23] Emphasis mine.

[24] *Treatise*, Section VI, 133.

[25] Donald Baxter, *Hume's Difficulty, Time and Identity in the Treatise* (New York: Routledge, 2008), 105.

[26] *Ibid.,* 135.

[27] *Ibid.,* 133.

[28] *Starting with Descartes*, 37-38.

[29] Alan Tomhave, "Cartesian Intuitions, Humean Puzzles, and the Buddhist Conception of the *Self,*" in *Philosophy East & West*, Vol. 60, No. 4, October 2010 (NA: University of Hawai'i Press, 2010), 445.

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