This paper reflects on some aspects of the problem of self-cognition in the context of two famous early modern naturalist projects of mastering the passions, those of Spinoza and Hume. Both have difficulties with individuation in general and with accounting for an individual self in particular. There are many interesting similarities in their accounts of the mechanics of the mind and of the passions too. Among some of the more striking ones is the role they give to the passion of pride. The object of pride is precisely the self, and the importance both accord to it appears proportional to the difficulties they encounter in accounting for a permanent individual self. Who, in the end, is the slave of the passions whose mechanisms they so penetratingly reveal, and who is the agent seeking to master them?

Given Hume’s deconstruction of reason as the locus of a true self, to say nothing about the self as an object of awareness that he reduces to a set of ever-changing impressions or ideas, one wonders whether calling reason a slave is not already giving it more substance than it can have? The same question can be posed to Spinoza, whose whole project famously is to free us, presumably our individual selves, from the bondage of passions. While the problem of personal identity in Hume has been much discussed, starting with his own remarks about having failed to account for it, the same cannot be said about Spinoza, who, moreover, shows no signs of even worrying about it.

In this paper that focuses on their accounts of pride more space is given to Spinoza than to Hume. The object of the passion of pride is self but the self it turns our attention to hides rather than reveals the true self from a proper cognitive grasp, and it is not clear how the latter—the true self—is related to the one pride and shame make us aware of. In spite of so many commonalities in their philosophical psychology, however, some of which are briefly listed below, Spinoza’s view on this point, as I will argue, is in stark contrast to Hume’s account where there is no self to cognize beyond the one our passions make us conscious of and whose pleasures and pains we are so concerned about. Instead of drawing out the consequences of his own theory Spinoza remains in the camp of the ancients in so far as his proposed remedy to the mastery of passions is concerned, whereas Hume seems more consistent in his commitment to the new kind of naturalism they both favor.
I start by outlining some of the more striking commonalities in their views and their possible Cartesian background. I then look at Spinoza’s concepts of activity and passivity and how they are reflected in his account of the passion of pride as distorting our knowledge of self and our true actions, before turning to Hume’s explanation of the mechanics of the passions and imagination.

Spinoza and Hume are naturalists, and both fully endorse the mechanistic philosophy of nature. Neither of them are reductionists, however, for while being opposed to Descartes’s metaphysics, they commit themselves to a strict methodological dualism, according to which thoughts or perceptions can only be explained in terms of other thoughts or perceptions, and not in terms of the bodily movements that may have occasioned them. Hume’s doctrine of impressions as original perceptions—at the origin of all other perceptions or ideas—together with his refusal to attempt a physicalistic account of them, is anticipated by Spinoza’s doctrine that ideas can only be explained by other ideas. Had Hume learnt from Spinoza’s criticism of Descartes’s mind-body interaction thesis, or drawn similar conclusions on his own? Where Spinoza declares that there is only one underlying substance differently expressed in distinct attributes, Hume, who does not care for metaphysical speculations about substances, writes blithely “in the mind or the body, whatever you want to call it,” yet takes great care to avoid explanations of mental and moral phenomena in terms of bodily or physical causes and events.

Moreover, Hume’s distinction between two kinds of perceptions, impressions and ideas, parallels Spinoza’s distinction between affections and ideas, and his idea-copies of impressions are very like Spinoza’s ideas of affections. Important similarities can be found also in their accounts of imagination and memory. Impressions remain in our memory when not overruled by other impressions and can be activated and combined by the imagination with other resembling impressions. Their ideas, Hume argues, can be combined on the basis of resemblance, contiguity and causal relations. Hume’s associationist psychology is on all its main points anticipated by Spinoza in the Ethics Parts Two and Three.1