# Thomas Reid on personal identity

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## 1 Identity and personal identity

# 1.1 The conviction of personal identity

Reid starts off by emphasizing the strength of our conviction in our own identity over time:

"The conviction which every man has of his identity, as far back as his memory reaches, needs no aid of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it, without first producing some degree of insanity."

His attitude towards this conviction is quite different than, for example, Hume's. Whereas Hume was willing to call into question the view that we so much as have an idea of the self, according to Reid, if we can give no explanation of our idea of the self, we must simply take it to be

"a part of our original constitution, or an effect of that constitution produced in a manner unknown to us."

Indeed, Reid thinks that it is impossible for us to give up our ideas about identity, since both thought and practical planning require it:

"this conviction is indispensably necessary to all exercise of reason. The operations of reason, whether in action or in speculation, are made up of successive parts. The antecedent are the foundation of the consequent, and, without the conviction that the antecedent have been seen or done by me, I could have no reason to proceed to the consequent, in any speculation, or in any active project whatever."

Nonetheless, we can try to get clear about what personal identity consists in. According to Reid, this consists of two things: trying to get clear on what identity is, and trying to get clear on what persons are.

## 1.2 The indefinability of identity

Reid thinks that identity is both a perfectly clear notion, and also too simple to be explicable in other terms:

"Identity in general I take to be a relation between a thing which is known to exist at one time, and a thing which is known to have existed at another time. If you ask whether they are one and the same, or two different things, every man of common sense understands the meaning of your question perfectly. Whence we may infer with certainty, that every man of common sense has a clear and distinct notion of identity.

If you ask a definition of identity, I confess I can give none; it is too simple a notion to admit of logical definition: I can say it is a relation, but I cannot find words to express the specific difference between this and other relations, though I am in no danger of confounding it with any other."

Does it make sense to say that identity is indefinable? How can something be too simple to be definable?

## 1.3 The simplicity of persons

Reid's central contention about persons is that they have no parts:

"all mankind place their personality in something that cannot be divided or consist of parts.

A part of a person is a manifest absurdity. When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person, and has lost nothing of his personality. If he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person he was before. The amputated member is no part of his person, otherwise it would

have a right to a part of his estate, and be liable for a part of hie engagements. It would be entitled to a share of his merit and demerit, which is manifestly absurd. A person is something indivisible . . . "

Is Reid right about this? Does this count against psychological theories? Does it count against theories which identify persons with physical objects? What kind of thing could a person be, if persons are indivisible?

## 2 Reid's objections to psychological theories of personal identity

Throughout his discussion of persons and identity, Reid offers a number of objections to the different versions of the psychological theory we have found in Locke and Hume.

2.1 Against the identification of persons with 'bundles of thoughts'

Recall that Hume claimed that persons

"are nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in perpetual flux and movement."

Against this view, Reid insists that

"My personal identity, therefore, implies the continued existence of that indivisible thing which I call myself. Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks, and deliberates, and resolves, and acts, and suffers. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks, and acts, and suffers."

Is this an argument, or is Reid just asserting his intuitions? Is it legitimate to appeal to common sense in this context?

Part of Reid's case against Hume is clearly based on common sense conviction; but he also has an argument against the view, based on the relationship between identity and continued existence. Reid does not think that identity can be defined, but he does think that we can know

"...that identity supposes an uninterrupted continuance of existence. That which has ceased to exist cannot be the same with that which afterwards begins to exist; for this would be to suppose a being to exist after it ceased to exist, and to have had existence before it was produced, which are manifest contradictions. Continued uninterrupted existence is therefore necessarily implied in identity."

But this poses a problem to an analysis of personal identity in terms of thoughts and other mental events:

"My thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment: they have no continued, but a successive, existence; but that self, or I, to which they belong, is permanent, and has the same relation to all the succeeding thoughts, actions, and feelings which I call mine."

What is the argument here? How should Hume respond?

#### 2.2 Personal identity does not admit of degrees

Reid also argues that psychological theories go wrong by leading to the conclusion that personal identity comes in degrees:

"The identity of a person is a perfect identity: wherever it is real, it admits of no degrees; and it is impossible that a person should be in part the same, and in part different"

Is Reid right that partial personal identity makes no sense? Why should we think this?

#### 2.3 Memory is evidence for rather than constitutive of personal identity

Reid does not think that memory is irrelevant to personal identity; he does think that memory is our main source of evidence for our continued existence over time:

"How do you know — what evidence have you — that there is such a permanent self which has a claim to all the thoughts, actions, and feelings which you call yours?

To this I answer, that the proper evidence I have of all this is remembrance, I remember that twenty years ago I conversed with such a person; I remember several things that passed in that conversation: my memory testifies, not only that this was done, but that it was done by me who now remember it. If it was done by me, I must have existed at that time, and continued to exist from that time to the present ..."

But, even though memory is evidence for our judgements about personal identity, we cannot explain personal identity in terms of memory:

"It may here be observed (though the observation would have been unnecessary, if some great philosophers had not contradicted it), that it is not my remembering any action of mine that makes me to be the person who did

it. This remembrance makes me to know assuredly that I did it; but I might have done it, though I did not remember it. That relation to me, which is expressed by saying that I did it, would be the same, though I had not the least remembrance of it. To say that my remembering that I did such a thing, or, as some choose to express it, my being conscious that I did it, makes me to have done it, appears to me as great an absurdity as it would be to say, that my belief that the world was created made it to be created."

Reid's idea here seems to be that memory presupposes personal identity rather than explains it. A way to develop this thought into an argument that memory theories of identity are circular.

#### 2.4 'Two or twenty intelligent beings may be the same person'

The theories of Locke and Hume seem to lead to the conclusion that, if 'personalities' can be switched from one body to another, persons can be switched from one body to another. But, as Reid notes, this seems to lead to unacceptable consequences:

"This doctrine has some strange consequences, which the author was aware of. Such as, that if the same consciousness can be transferred from one intelligent being to another, which he thinks we cannot show to be impossible, then two or twenty intelligent beings may be the same person. And if the intelligent being may lose the consciousness of the actions done by him, which surely is possible, then he is not the person that did those actions; so that one intelligent being may be two or twenty different persons, if he shall so often lose the consciousness of this former actions."

### 2.5 The brave officer and the schoolboy

Reid also gives an ingenious argument for the conclusion that Locke's theory of personal identity leads to a contradiction:

"There is another consequence of this doctrine, which follows no less necessarily, though Mr. Locke probably did not see it. It is, that a man may be, and at the same time not be, the person that did a particular action.

Suppose a brave officer to have been flogged when a boy at school for robbing an orchard, to have taken a standard from the enemy in his first campaign, and to have been made a general in advanced life; suppose, also, which must be admitted to be possible, that, when he took the standard, he was conscious of his having been flogged at school, and that, when made a general, he was conscious of his taking the standard, but had absolutely lost the consciousness of his flogging.

These things being supposed, it follows, from Mr. Lockes doctrine, that he who was flogged at school is the same person who took the standard, and

that he who took the standard is the same person who was made a general. Whence it follows, if there be any truth in logic, that the general is the same person with him who was flogged at school. But the generals consciousness does not reach so far back as his flogging; therefore, according to Mr. Lockes doctrine, he is not the person who was flogged. Therefore the general is, and at the same time is not, the same person with him who was flogged at school."

How should Locke modify his theory to respond to this objection?