

Locke's psychological theory of personal identity

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1 Identity, diversity, and kinds

In the chapter of the *Essay on Human Understanding* entitled 'Of identity and diversity', Locke explains what it is for things of various kinds to be the same thing over time.

The problem that he is addressing here can be put like this. Look at anything in the room right now — for example, a piece of chalk. Now suppose that you come back in this room in two days time, and look at a piece of chalk. You might ask: is this *the same* piece of chalk that I looked at two days ago? Or, in other words, is this piece of chalk that I am looking at now *identical to* or *distinct (diverse) from* the one that I looked at two days ago? Now, if we get interested enough in chalk, we might ask a further question: what does it mean to say that the piece of chalk you saw two days ago is identical to the piece of chalk that you are looking at today? I.e., what is it for a piece of chalk to exist through, or persist through, time?

Now, if that question makes sense, you can imagine asking the same question about any sort of thing: a desk, a person, a university, and so on. And it seems possible that the answer you would give to this question would be different depending on what kind of thing you were asking about. This is what Locke thought; he thought that when we ask what it is for x to be identical through time, the answer depends on what kind of thing x is.

According to Locke, there are four relevantly different kinds of things: atoms, complex bodies, living organisms, and persons.

The simplest case for Locke is that of atoms:

“Let us suppose an Atom . . . existing in a determined time and place; 'tis evident, that, considered in any instant of its Existence, it is, in that instant, the same with it self. For being, at that instant, what it is, and nothing else, it is the same, and so must continue, as long as its Existence is continued: for so long it will be the same, and no other.” (§3)

Locke thought of atoms as unchanging, and as distinct in space from each other; and he thought that this meant that there was no problem in explaining what it is for an atom to continue to exist over time.

Matters are not so with what Locke calls a *mass* or a *body*:

“if two more Atoms be joined together into the same Mass, every one of the Atoms will be the same, by the foregoing rule: and whilst they exist united together, the Mass, consisting of the same Atoms, must be the same Mass, or the same Body, let the parts be never so differently jumbled: But if one of these Atoms be taken away, or new one added, it is no longer the same Mass, or the same Body.” (§3)

An immediate problem with this definition is that it does not seem to fit the case of living things. A tree can pretty clearly remain the same tree over time, even though it does not consist of the same group of Atoms during its life; same goes for animals, and people. Locke agrees:

“In the state of living Creatures, their Identity depends not on a Mass of the same Particles; but on something else. For in them a variation of great parcels of Matter alters not the Identity: An Oak, growing from a Plant to a great Tree, and then lopp'd, is still the same Oak: and a Colt grown up to a horse, sometimes fat, sometimes lean, is all the while the same Horse. . . .

We must therefore consider wherein an Oak differs from a Mass of Matter, and that seems to me to be in this; that the one is only the Cohesion of Particles of Matter any how united, the other such a disposition of them as constitutes the parts of an Oak; and such organization of those parts, as is fit to receive, and distribute nourishment, so as to continue , and frame the Wood, Bark, and Leaves, etc. of an Oak, in which consists the vegetable Life. . . .

The Case is not so much different in Brutes, but that any one may hence see what makes an Animal, and continues it the same.” (§§3-5)

How do these three categories apply to artefacts, like statues or desks? What is it for these to remain the same thing over time? See the discussion of watches in §5.)

Further, Locke continues, the same story applies to human animals, men and women:

“This also shews wherein the Identity of the same Man consists; viz. in nothing but a participation of the same continued Life, by constantly fleeting Particles of Matter, in succession vitally united to the same organized Body. He that shall place the *Identity* of Man in any thing else, but like that of other Animals in one fitly organized Body . . . will find it hard, to make an *Embryo*, one of Years, mad and sober, the same Man, by any Supposition that will not make it possible for . . . Socrates . . . and Cesar Borgia to be the same Man. For if the Identity of Soul alone makes the same Man, and there be nothing in the nature of Matter, why the same individual Spirit may not be united to different Bodies, it will be possible, that those Men, living in distant ages . . . may have been the same Man. . . . And that way of speaking would agree yet worse with the Notions of those Philosophers, who allow of Transmigration . . . I think no body, could he be sure that the soul of Heliogabalus were in one of his Hogs, would yet say that the Hog were a Man . . .” (§6)

Here Locke does more than state his view about the identities of men; he also gives an argument against the view that the identities of men consist in sameness of an immaterial soul. How does this argument go? Does the argument rely on the assumption that there are no immaterial souls?

2 Personal identity

This leaves us with the question of what it is for a *person* to be identical through time. But, you might think, we have already answered this question. We have already seen what it is for a man or woman to be identical over time; and isn't this the same thing as a person being identical over time?

2.1 *The distinction between men and women, and persons*

Locke does not think so. He distinguishes between persons, on the one hand, and men and women, on the other:

“Tis not therefore Unity of Substance that comprehends all sorts of Identity . . . But to conceive, and judge of it aright, we must consider what Idea the Word it is applied to stands for: It being one thing to be the same Substance, another the same Man, and a third the same Person, if Person, Man, and Substance, are three names standing for three different Ideas; for such is the Idea belonging to that name, such must be the Identity . . .” (§7)

His idea seems to be this: in order to say what it is for an x to be the same x over time, we have to figure out first what sort of thing an x is. And, if an x is a sufficiently different sort of thing than a y , the story about what it is for an x to be the same x over time will be different than the story about what it is for a y to be the same y over time.

But why should we think that persons are different sorts of things than men and women? Locke argues for this distinction using his example of the Prince and the Cobbler:

“For should the soul of a Prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the Prince’s past life, enter and inform the body of a Cobbler as soon as deserted by his own soul, every one sees, he would be the same Person with the Prince, accountable only for the Prince’s actions: But who would say it was the same Man?”

What is the argument here? Is it convincing?

2.2 *Persons and personal identity*

But then what sort of thing is a person, and what is it for a person to persist through time? According to Locke, a person is

“a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places; which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking, and as it seems to me essential to it ...” (§9)

This view about what persons are leads to a view of personal identity, i.e. a view about what it is for something to remain the same person over time:

“For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and ’tis that, that makes every one to be, what he calls *self*; and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: And as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person* ...” (§9)

The view, then, seems to be this: a person, x , existing at t , and a person, y , existing at some later time t^* , are the same person if and only if they share the same consciousness.

But what, you might ask, does it mean for x and y to share the same consciousness? Locke’s answer seems to be contained in the following claim:

“For as far as any intelligent Being can repeat the *Idea* of any past Action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present Action; so far it is the same *personal Self*.” (§10)

This explains why Locke’s theory is sometimes called the ‘memory’ theory of personal identity. For x and y to be the same person is for them to share the same consciousness; and for them to share the same consciousness is for y to be able to remember (or ‘repeat the idea of’) elements of the consciousness of x .

2.3 *Persons and immaterial souls*

One of the competitors to Locke's view is the view that personal identity is guaranteed not by connections of memory, but by sameness of immaterial soul. Locke argues against this view in §§12-14. He gives at least two different arguments against this view. Consider the following two passages:

“And therefore those, who place thinking in an immaterial substance only ... must shew why personal Identity cannot be preserved in the change of immaterial substances, as well as animal identity is preserved in the change of material Substances ...” (§12)

“All those who hold pre-existence ... allow the Soul to have no remaining consciousness of what it did in that pre-existent State, either wholly separate from Body, or informing any other Body ... So that personal Identity reaching no farther than consciousness reaches, a pre-existent Spirit ... must needs make different Persons.” (§14)

What is Locke's argument in these passages? How should the defender of the 'immaterial soul' view of personal identity respond?

2.4 *Persons and material substances*

We have already seen why Locke prefers his view to the views that personal identity is guaranteed by sameness of immaterial substance and sameness of animal life. But what would he have to say to someone who identified persons with bodies? He gives this example:

“Happiness and misery, being that, for which every one is concerned for *himself*, not mattering what becomes of any Substance, not joined to, or affected with that consciousness. For as it is evident in the instance I gave but now [of having one's little finger cut off], if the consciousness went along with the little Finger, when it was cut off, that would be the same self which was concerned for the whole Body yesterday, as making part of it self, whose actions it then cannot but admit as its own now. Though if the same Body should live, and immediately from the separation of the little finger have its own peculiar consciousness, whereof the little Finger knew nothing, it would not at all be concerned for it, as a part of it self, or could own any of its Actions, or have any of them imputed to him.” (§18)

(See also the example of the Day-man and the Night-man, §23.)

What's the argument here? What criterion is Locke here using to test for sameness of person?

3 Problem cases for Locke's view

Since Locke links personal identity so closely to consciousness, problem cases for his view arise whenever there are interruptions of consciousness which, intuitively do not make for a difference in persons. Locke considers a number of cases like this.

Sleep and forgetfulness:

“But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness, being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our Lives wherein we have the whole train of our past Actions before our Eyes in one view: But even the best memories losing sight of one part while they are viewing another . . . and in sound sleep, having no Thoughts at all . . . I say, in all these cases, our consciousness being interrupted, and we losing sight of our past selves, doubts are raised about whether we are the same thinking thing . . . (§10)”

Amnesia:

“...suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my Life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same Person, that did those Actions, had those Thoughts, that I was once conscious of, though I have now forgot them?” (§19)

Drunkenness:

“But is not a Man Drunk and Sober the same Person, why else is he punished for the Fact he commits when Drunk, though he is never afterwards conscious of it? Just as much the same Person, as a Man that walks, and does other things in his sleep, is the same Person, and is answerable for any mischief he shall do in it.” (§22)

In each of these cases, Locke seems willing to accept the consequences of his theory, and say that, contra our ordinary view, we have a difference of person here. But the case of drunkenness poses a particular problem for Locke. Locke is concerned to link personal identity to our practices, both legal and moral, of holding people responsible for ‘their’ actions. But we do hold people responsible for what they do when they are drunk; so, if drunkenness does really interrupt personal identity, should we revise our practices, and not hold people responsible for things that they do when drunk?