

# Locke on Personal Identity

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Locke was one of the first philosophers to bring the problem of personal identity into philosophical discussion. The question enters into Locke's discussion of identity and he acknowledges that what we come to think of as personal identity, what it is to be the same person, differs from what we think of as identity in objects, vegetables and animals. He starts off with a dualist picture of man, seeing him as consisting of two substances, a material body and an immaterial self, but concedes that none of these substances, sameness of body or sameness of soul, can determine what it is to be the same person. This leads Locke to make a distinction between being the same man, or human being, and the same person. Being the same human being comes to mean having the same body, in the same way that we think that an oak tree is the same tree throughout its life although the matter of the tree changes completely during its life span. Having the same body however, is not enough for being the same person. To Locke it is conceivable that we could imagine two persons switching bodies. In this way, we could come to see the same person that we have come to know in the form of one body in another body and react to the person in this human being in the same way as we would to the person in his former body. That we could actually imagine such a switch of bodies is questionable. The thought might seem easy to entertain at first, but it is unclear what it would be to understand this thought, or what kind of proof we would accept to believe that a stranger who says that he is the same person as someone we know but in another body actually is that person.

According to Locke we need something more than being the same human being to know what it is to be the same person. Locke's concern with this is especially apparent when it comes to questions of justice. To be able to punish or reward someone for something they have done, it is important for us to know that we are punishing or rewarding the same person that did the thing, otherwise the practice would be unjustified. In relation to this, Locke also brings in how we in certain situations do not hold a person responsible for what he has done because he, in doing this, "*is not himself, or is besides himself*" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 343). Locke takes this to show that our understanding of someone as the same person is not the same as that of someone as the same human being, and that we sometimes might think of the same human being as two persons. Even if these ways of talking about somebody as being or not being the same person help to show what it is that we are talking about when we say that someone is or is not the same, it is not clear that this distinction between the same human being and the same person is as evident as Locke considers it. I will return to this point later. To explain what it is that makes the same person, Locke appeals to the same consciousness, which he seems to take as an awareness of and concern for our present, as well as our past, actions, thoughts, ideas and so on. Our memory of doing certain things is thus given an important role in what it is to be the same person. I can be said to be the same person that performed an action only if I remember performing that action.

The emphasis on memory in Locke's account of what it is to be the same person can be, and has also been, criticised. It seems as if the idea of remembering doing a certain thing is not very important for us to be able to say that it is the same person who did the thing. An example of this, originally Berkeley's, that has been much used to show that Locke's idea does not cover the continuity of what it is to be the same person, is that of an elderly officer who can remember taking a standard as a young officer but not being flogged as a boy for stealing an orchard, even if the young officer remembered the flogging. Following Locke here, we would have to say that the officer both is not and is the same person as the boy; he cannot remember the flogging but remembers taking the standard as the young officer who in turn remembers being flogged. This seems contradictory, but we would not usually find any contradictions in saying that the elderly officer is the same person as both the boy and the young officer, regardless of his memories of the different events.

We may also ask in what sense Locke talks about remembering since we often use the word quite loosely and in many different situations where the importance of having done something is not that significant for being able to say that we remember something. I may for example clearly remember that I did something, that I put my passport in a certain place, and remember doing this even though it evidently is not so. To go on saying 'This is how I remember it' may not be seen as wrong although we in other situations would look at it as wrong to say that we remember doing something if it turns out that we did not do it. In this case we would say that I only think I remember doing something. We might in this case make use of a distinction between apparent and genuine memories and understand Locke as talking about genuine memories. 'Remember' would then be used only in situations where I remember doing the things that I actually did.

This idea of genuine memories is not very clear though. It might follow from the fact that I did something that I remember doing it, although it may also not be that way, as in the case of the officer, but I can only have a genuine memory of doing something if I really did it, and remembering doing something is not enough to prove that I did it. Having a memory of doing something is not enough to know that this memory is a genuine one since I can remember doing something that I did not do. I can also remember doing something that it turns out that somebody else did instead, but this would not mean that I was the same person as the person, other than me, who did it. In the same way, I can be said to be the same person who did something even if I do not remember it. This can again be seen in the example of the officer, but also in a more everyday example like not remembering if I locked the door when I went out. I might be forced to go back and check if it is locked, but even if I cannot remember locking it, there is no doubt that I was the one who locked it when I find that it is locked. Neither does the fact that I cannot remember much of what I did as a child mean that I was not the person who did it. It also says something about the varied ways we have of thinking about memory that I, even if I do not remember a certain incident myself, can come to remember it, or create a memory of it from being told about the incident repeatedly by others.

By, in a way, equating consciousness with memory, Locke does not seem to capture what it is we mean by saying that somebody is the same person. This is not only because his description of consciousness is flawed but also because it is difficult, if not impossible, to locate what it is we mean with a person in "a thinking intelligent Being" (*An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, p. 335). What is being left out in a definition of a person like this, is the same thing that makes Locke's distinction between being the same human being and being the same person look dubious, namely that persons are not to be found in some inner characteristics or properties, but in the bodily beings surrounding us. As Anthony Flew remarks, "in the ordinary use of the word "people" we do actually meet

people and shake hands with them; we do not meet the fleshy houses in which they are living or the containers in which they are kept" ('Locke and Personal Identity', p.59). What it is to be a 'person' and the 'same person' is not connected with recognising some uniting principle in a bodily form. It comes with all the ways we have of reacting and responding to other people as persons. Being the same human being, that is leading a continuous life, having the same body and so on, is here as important as collecting all the actions of the person under the term of memory.

Locke wanted to introduce this distinction between the same 'person' and the same 'human being' to make sense of the suggestion that we could understand two persons switching bodies and the practice of excusing somebody for something they did because they were not themselves at that time. I have already mentioned that it might not be as easy to understand what it would be to switch bodies, or perceive a living human being as the same person as a person who was previously alive, as Locke makes it out to be. When it comes to the way we hold people responsible for their actions, there also seems to be something queer in saying that we sometimes do not punish or reward someone for what they have done because they were not the same person who did it. If they were not the same person, that is themselves, we might want to ask, which person were they?

In bringing in this discussion of responsibility, Locke recognises the importance things like taking responsibility for one's actions and acting according to some personal characteristics, so that we sometimes can say that people are not themselves, have in our notion of a 'person'. He seems to be wrong however, in saying that these considerations are decisive for the ways we come to look at a person as being the same as he was before. There also seems to be something wrong in linking our responsibility to a faculty of consciousness or memory. This way of describing responsibility does not seem to correspond to the way we usually think of it. That I remember, or is conscious of an action is not the only consideration that plays a part in deciding whether I am responsible for the action or not. Another consideration is, for example, if I actually did it. As I mentioned earlier it is possible for me to remember doing something I did not do, or that somebody else did. I may also not remember doing something that I did do, but still feel responsible for the action and feel a want to take the consequences of this action. This shows in situations where my actions might have had other consequences than I intended or might come to mean something else than I wanted them to mean. That I was unconscious of the character of these actions does not lessen the responsibility I can feel for what I have done. That I can feel and react this way is part of what it is for something to be my action, what it is for me to know that I was the one who did something. My actions are the way I show myself to other persons and the world, and there is an important sense in which I am the same person throughout all of my actions, a sense that is intricately bound up with the fact that I am the same human being.

There are of course situations where we say that someone is not the same person as he was before or that we do not feel as ourselves. This does not however, reflect so much upon us not being the same persons, in the normal use of the word, as it does on the importance that our actions and the relationships we have with other people have for us being persons, or the same persons. In the same way as we see a continuity in the human body, even if it goes through major changes during its life, we come to see and expect a continuity in a person's actions. We come to see certain traits as characteristic for a person and expect the person to act according to these traits. To know someone is to know how the person tends to react in certain situations and in the context of our relationship with that person and if the person acts in a completely different way from what we expect we might react with saying that he is not the same person. This is true in a sense, but the idea that somebody is not the same person only makes sense if there is another sense in which the person still is the same person.

Locke's account of personal identity starts off with his distinction of being the same human being and being the same person. Locke identifies being the same human being with having the same body while he identifies the same person in the unity of a consciousness, better described as memory. In this essay I have tried to argue that there are problems with Locke's idea of understanding the same person as a unity of consciousness in terms of memory. I have also wanted to show that it is impossible to locate the person in something else than the bodily being, the human being as Locke puts it, and that there is no sense in the division between the human being and the person that Locke wants to make. There are situations where we might think of somebody as not being the same person as he was before but this is only possible because he is the same person, the same human being, as before. If we were put in a situation where we would not know whether the same human being also 'contained' the same person as he did yesterday, we could not talk about a person not being the same in the way we do now.

### Bibliography

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