

Reid on Locke's Theory of Personal Identity

1. Locke's theory of personal identity: John Locke stated that the criterion (or "principle", or thing) that makes someone the same person over time is consciousness. Just as long as someone retains consciousness (i.e., memory) of some past action, the one remembering and the one remembered are one and the same person.

2. The contradiction: Thomas Reid points out that this theory of personhood results in a contradiction. Consider:

- The general: There once was a boy who was flogged for stealing apples from an orchard. But, the boy grew up to be a great war hero, who captured the enemy's flag in a great battle. The war hero retired as a decorated general. Now, the war hero could remember being flogged as a boy, and the decorated general could remember capturing the enemy's flag. However, the decorated general could NOT remember being flogged as a boy.

If Locke's theory is true, then the law of transitivity is violated. To see that this is so: Call the flogged boy "A", the war hero "B", and the decorated general "C". We see that:

- Since the war hero remembers being flogged as a boy, "A=B" is true.
- Since the decorated general remembers capturing the enemy's flag, "B=C" is true.
- Since the decorated general does NOT remember being flogged as a boy, "A≠C" is true.
- Since "A=B" and "B=C" are true, then "A=C" is true (by transitivity).

This is a contradiction. It cannot be the case that both "A≠C" is true AND "A=C" is true. In other words, it cannot be the case that the flogged boy both IS NOT the same person as the decorated general, and IS the same person as the decorated general. Therefore, there must be something wrong with Locke's theory of personal identity.

3. Other objections: Reid adds that it would be strange to think that identity—a fixed, stable, persisting thing—was equal to consciousness, a thing that is transient, momentary, and forever changing.

Furthermore, Locke seems to confuse the thing BY WHICH we know that we are the same person with the PERSON ITSELF. For, it seems that memory is HOW WE KNOW that we are the same person. But, how we know something cannot be

equal to the thing that is known; or, as Reid puts it, Locke has “confounded the testimony with the thing testified.” In other words, the definition of “me” is what we call circular if “me” just means “memory of me doing something”—for, the definition contains the word to be defined!

[Reply: Is this really what Locke says? Is he really saying a person just IS a collection of memories, or is he rather just saying that remembering a certain event makes it MINE?]

[Other objections: (1) What if I remembered something that happened to someone else AS IF it had happened to me? For instance, there are crazy people who wake up one day claiming to be Napoleon Bonaparte, and claiming to have all of his memories, etc. If Locke is right, that person IS Napoleon. But, that seems mistaken. What Locke needs is to say, personhood is preserved if one remembers IN THE RIGHT WAY. But, remembering “in the right way” just means “remembering only things that actually happened TO ME”—which pre-supposes identity as something independent of memory.

(2) Locke says that an afterlife is possible because God will give a new body our same consciousness, and set of memories. But, couldn't an omnipotent God give TWO new bodies our same consciousness? But, then, BOTH of the new persons cannot be identical to me. Which one of them is ME, then (if any)? Imagine a tele-transporter, such as those in Star Trek. The device annihilates you, and then re-creates another body elsewhere with all of your memories, consciousness, etc. The question is, what if the device ONLY re-created you without destroying you? (This happens in one episode) Or, what if it destroyed you, but re-created TWO of you? Can Locke account for these sorts of scenarios?]