

Locke on Personal Identity

1. Identity: Identity just means being one thing, and not another. A rock has a certain identity. It is THIS individual rock, and not THAT rock. Likewise, with a certain oak tree, or a certain human being. Note:

- An individual object cannot be in two places at once.
- Two distinct individuals cannot be in the same place at the same time.

2. The principle of individuation: Locke is looking for the “principle of individuation” (POI); that is, the principle that makes something the SAME thing over time. Ultimately, he is searching for the principle of “personal identity”—that is, what makes someone the same PERSON over time.

Consider being shown a photo of yourself as a toddler. “That is a picture of me as a child,” you might say. But, WHY? What is it that makes you and the child in that picture ONE AND THE SAME INDIVIDUAL PERSON? To answer this question, Locke first distinguishes between three terms:

- Substance: This refers to the STUFF that composes an object; e.g., the atoms, or particles that it is made of.
- Man (or, tree, dog, etc.): This refers to the living ORGANISM. This is a LIVING body, organized in a certain way.
- Person: A “person” is a rational, reflective, thinking, self-aware thing. This is what we call the “self”; it is the ME that I refer to when I say “myself.”

The POI of inanimate objects (mass): Inanimate objects are substances only; they are NOT living organisms or persons. So, the principle of individuation for an inanimate object is just its “stuff”; i.e., its mass. Therefore, if you have a rock, for example, and you chip off a tiny piece, strictly speaking it is not the same rock.

The POI of living things (life): Note that living things—such as plants and animals—are both substances AND organisms, but are NOT persons (except human beings). The thing that makes a living thing such as an oak tree the SAME oak tree over time does not seem to be the matter that composes it. For, the oak tree was once a tiny sapling, and it is continuously losing old parts and gaining new ones—yet it remains the same tree. The thing that seems to make the tree the same tree over time is the organization that composes life, or LIFE itself. As long as the tree remains one continuous life, we say it is the SAME tree.

The POI of persons (memory): See below for a detailed discussion of this.

3. Personal Identity: A “person” is the rational, emotional, self-aware “self” that is found in every normal, adult human being. Most take the terms “man” and “person” to be equivalent, but they needn’t be. For instance, a severely disabled human being may be no more conscious than a vegetable. In this case, we might say that—though there exists a living human organism—there is a “man” present, but no “person” present. Likewise, Locke would say that, if there were a super-intelligent, self-aware, philosopher-cat, this cat would be a “person” even though it is not a “man.”

What is the criterion or principle that makes someone the same PERSON over time? Locke rejects the following three views, which suggest that personhood is preserved by (a) same matter, (b) same organism, and (c) same soul:

(a) Of material substances: First, Locke rejects sameness of material substance as the thing that makes someone the same person over time: Clearly if I lose a material part, I continue to be the same person. If you cut off my hand, I am still the same person. So, sameness of person does not require sameness of matter.

(b) Of living organisms: Locke also rejects the living organism as the thing that preserves identity. To illustrate, Locke uses the following example:

- The Prince and the Cobbler: Imagine that the memories, or consciousness, of a prince were transferred to the body of a cobbler. When the cobbler wakes up, he thinks he is the prince, he claims to be the prince, has all of the memories of the prince, etc. Meanwhile, the cobbler’s consciousness goes into the prince’s body. (just like in the movie, *Freaky Friday*) We would say that the prince now inhabits the living body of the cobbler and vice versa.

So, sameness of person does not require sameness of living organism.

(c) Of immaterial substances: Some suggest that there is some NON-material part of a human being, and a person remains the same just as long as they retain that immaterial part. They call this immaterial part the SOUL. But, Locke does not think that sameness of soul is what constitutes sameness of person either, for two reasons:

- (1) First, we can imagine the same consciousness being transferred to a different immaterial object, or soul. (Imagine the prince and the cobbler scenario, where only the prince’s MEMORIES—or consciousness—are transferred into the cobbler’s body and soul, while the cobbler’s memories/consciousness are transferred into the prince’s body and soul.)

(2) On the other hand, we can imagine the same soul being shared by two persons:

- Socrates: Imagine that when Socrates died, his soul entered another body, and so on. Imagine further that you and Socrates shared the SAME soul? Would this mean that you and Socrates were one and the same PERSON? It doesn't seem so.

To support this idea, Locke suggests that reward and punishment, as well as anticipation of pleasure or pain, are good indicators of personhood. If you inherited Socrates' soul, would it be fair to punish YOU for any misdeeds he may have done? It doesn't seem so. Furthermore, would it be rational for Socrates to look forward to—i.e., be excited about—some pleasure or happy experience that YOU would someday experience? Again, it doesn't seem so.

The conclusion is that where the "self" is located does not seem to necessarily be where one single soul is located.

4. Conclusion: Locke concludes that the principle of individuation for persons is CONSCIOUSNESS (by "consciousness", Locke seems to mean "memory"). That is, as long as an individual possesses the memories, the one remembering and the one remembered are the same person. Several of the above examples support the idea that memory/consciousness is the key factor for personhood. (recall the Prince and the Cobbler, and the Socrates examples) To illustrate once more, consider:

- Day Man and Night Man: In one body, every morning at dawn, a man wakes up and goes about his life by the name Day Man. Every evening at sunset, however, he completely forgets everything that he has done that day, and "wakes up" and goes about a completely different life by the name Night Man. Day Man and Night Man are completely unaware of each other, live completely different lives, and have completely different sets of memories—yet, they share the same body.

It seems to most of us that there are two people—or "persons"—sharing the same body. The key to their distinct identities seems to be separate consciousness, or separate sets of memories. Thus, Locke concludes that consciousness, or memory is the POI for personhood. Of consciousness, he writes:

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*; it is

the same *self* now it was then, and it is by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it that that action was done. (2.27.9)

5. Objections: Locke raises a couple of objections against himself:

(a) Memory-loss: Most of us lose entire chunks of memory, forgetting parts of our life. Does this mean that the one trying to remember, and the one forgotten are not the same person? That seems absurd.

Reply: Locke bites the bullet here, and admits that, No, they would NOT be the same person (though they WOULD be the same MAN, or living organism).

(b) Punishing the drunkard: If that is correct, then a sober man is often not the same “person” as he was while drunk (e.g., if he forgets what he has done while drunk). Yet, earlier you said that punishment was a good indicator of personal identity. The fact that we often punish a sober man for the crimes he committed while drunk shows that they are one and the same person, even though the sober man cannot remember committing the crime.

Reply: Locke replies that, No, strictly speaking it is NOT fair to punish the sober man for what the drunk man did. However, since we have no way of getting into people’s consciousness and determining whether they really do not remember committing a crime (they might remember, but lie about it), the best we can do is punish a sober man for what the same man (i.e., the same living organism) did while drunk—even if they might not be the same “person”.