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Introduction to Philosophy

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Lockean Identity

John Locke is well known today as a major influence on modern democracy. However, he is much more than this. Locke was also a doctor, a famous educator in the realm of childrearing, and a philosopher (Laine). In 1689, Locke published *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in which he describes his idea of personal identity, or identity through time. He used these notions to define his specifications for moral accountability and punishment, based on when a person counts as having been the same person in the past, and is therefore responsible for his actions. Locke was an empiricist, so he believed that things are known by experience. This led to certain confusions in his writing about non-corporeal, and non-empirical, entities, such as the “soul.” In chapter 27, “Identity and Diversity”, in his work, Locke describes his personal identity conditions.

In this chapter, Locke begins by describing generally what identity is. He explains that any thing of a certain kind can only exist in one place at one time. (Locke 112). This is the idea of identity. There cannot be multiple beginnings of existence for the same thing, or a single beginning of existence for multiple things. There must be a diverse identity for each. For different types of bodies, Locke defines identity differently. For example, he defines the identity of a living being as “one cohering body partaking of one common life” (Locke 114). Therefore, he reasons that if the particles that make up the body change, the living being remains the same thing as before, with the same identity, because the particles are still part of the same life. However, for inanimate objects, identity differs. For simple substances, such as atoms, they remain the same as long as nothing is added or removed. For compound substances like machines, he defines them more like living beings, in that parts can change, as long as the common life or purpose remains constant. However, a machine’s life is based off of the motions that make it work, which can come from outside influences, such as the need for a human to wind a watch. Thus, the machine may stop working and still remain the same machine, as long as it has the hypothetical ability to perform its action (Locke 114).

All these ideas of identity led Locke to his specific description of personal identity. Locke defined three different pieces to a human’s identity: the “man”, the “person”, and the “soul”. According to Locke, these parts function differently, based on the preceding definitions. The “man”, in Locke’s definition, is “a creature of our own shape and physical constitution”, which does not require the capacity to think and reason. (Locke 115). Locke explains that this physical form is the way a man would recognize and acknowledge another. He provides a story about a parrot as an example that a man does not require the mental capacities of reasoning. One could run into a body that appeared to be human in the physical sense, but lacked these capacities, and still call it a man, while running into a parrot with those capacities would not prompt one to call that parrot a man. A parrot cannot be a man no matter what powers of reasoning it may have, because it will never have that shape, the defining characteristic of a man (Locke 115). A man’s identity condition is defined in the same manner as that of other living beings. As long as the man draws from the same coherent life as before, he remains the same man, even if the constituent pieces may have changed. To be a man, one must have the physical aspect of a man. To be the same man through time, one must draw from the same life force over that time.

The next definition of identity that Locke describes is that of a “person.” The person has those aforementioned capacities of thinking and reasoning, as well as being able to “consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing at different times and places” (Locke 115). He must be able to bring into his current consciousness, instances of himself from other moments in time, in order to prove the continuity of his consciousness. Therefore, the parrot thought experiment provided revealed the difference between a man and a person. That parrot could possibly have been a person, but not a man. Locke provides another thought experiment to emphasize this distinction, that of a cobbler and a prince (Locke 118). The prince’s soul and consciousness (the aspects that make him a person) enters the body of a cobbler. Those who see the cobbler identify him as the same man as before. However, the experiences he remembers and the actions he is accountable for are now those of the prince. Thus, the cobbler is no longer the same person. The prince remains the same person, but a different man. Locke defines the actions that a person is accountable for as those that he can remember doing, because those are the ones that he as a person did. As Locke states, what makes the person continue to “be himself *to himself* is sameness of consciousness, so personal identity depends entirely on that” (Locke 116). If someone were drunk or sleepwalking while doing an action, it would be like he were a whole different person, and he should not be punished for that action, in an ideal world (Locke 120). Thus, a person remains a person as long as they partake of the same consciousness.

Finally, Locke loosely defines the portion of identity known as the “soul.” This portion is the least well defined, because the soul is not an empirical substance. However, Locke defines it as an immaterial substance that is different from personhood and manhood. He uses another thought experiment to demonstrate the difference between a person and a soul. If a person had the same soul as Thersites from the siege of Troy, yet he could not bring the memories of the battle into his consciousness, one would not say that he was the same person as Thersites. However, the fact that the soul could have transferred over is completely feasible, as it is not inherently tied to a certain physical body. Therefore, the soul is separate from the person. As long as the soul continues to be the same immaterial pieces, it remains the same soul, whatever man it is in.

As for the difference between the man and the person, there is debate about Locke’s distinction. For example, if a man is drunk and cannot remember what he did, should is he really blameless for his actions? He made the decision to drink (Laine). Another such criticism is as follows. Suppose that a normal person exists, and his physical body, the man, is completely healthy. Then, somehow the person changes bodies to that of a blind man. According to Locke, he is still the same person. However, his conscious experience would be completely different as this new man. It does not seem to fit into the unified flow of consciousness. Is he still the same person?

Locke distinguishes identity into three separate parts, similar to Descartes’ separation of mind and body. However, Locke’s separation is in support of his views of moral responsibility, and relies for the most part on his empirical philosophical beliefs. While the soul, as an immaterial portion, does not fit into that idea, he barely touches upon that portion of identity. Instead, he focuses on the “man”, the physical identity of a human, which requires continuity of life, and the “person”, the intelligent, thinking, reasoning aspect, which requires continuity of consciousness in order to be the same. These definitions of identity helped Locke in his discussions of individuality and morality. They help society define many notions of culpability as well, such as the idea of “pleading insanity” in the court system. Locke’s view of personal identity helps people consider their own personal identities, and their culpability for actions.

Works Cited

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