

# Of Personal Identity

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Philosophy 100C: Empiricists

June 2018

## **Acknowledgements**

To thank A.D. Stone here seems extra, given he is the instructors of this class. Without his dedication and guidance, this paper would have been worse, if not stubbornly boring and unphilosophical. It seems necessary, to offer my gratitude to B.R. Dinovo, whose vivid analogies and philosophical examples have enlightened me throughout the quarter, without whom my paper would have lost some dimensions due to my insufficient understanding in Hume's underlying moral theories. I also would like to dedicate this paper to Miss R.E. Taylor, who once inspired me in the topic which I investigate now; without whom this paper would have remained flatly theoretical. Thanks are insufficient, for in any field of studies questions are always more important than answers.

## **Contents**

A couple years ago, I was trying to go out with a girl I met during my first week of college, therefore I was trying to find topics to discuss with her even I was not around. In that very winter break, she sent me a picture of her newly-dyed hair. I replied: "You are now a different person, because you have a new hairstyle!" I shall refrain myself from disclosing further details, but we did not end up going out. It also raises an important question, a rather philosophical one: what defines our personal identities? How do we assert we are the same persons over time? Is appearance essential enough to dictate our identities, at least in others' perceptions? If not sufficiently, then what sustains our personal identities throughout time? Nevertheless, we agree on the premise: existence of personal identity, and multilaterally expect others to be the same person over some variations of time, if not the whole stretch of life. Both John Locke and David Hume have contributed in the subject of personal identities, but with rather different approaches and emphases. In this paper, I shall venture and deeply analyse different approaches on both Locke and Hume on such subject of personal identity.

How do their underlying moral philosophies relate to their approaches to their theories of personal identities? And lastly, what are some important effects and implications on our current legal system. I address these above-mentioned issues by focusing on differences between Locke's and Hume's accounts of persons and personal identity. I propose such difference can be understood on the basis of their distinct moral theories.

In the seventeenth century, John Locke recognised the importance of the issue related to identity and diversity, because it is on which our legal and moral systems are built. Let alone Locke realised the technical puzzle in the term "sameness", because the notion of "sameness" becomes problematic when we apply to persons. Unlike a mass of matter, which has no ability to undergo change over time, "sameness" means something a little bit different when we apply "identity" to living bodies. (Essay II.xxvii.3)<sup>1</sup> In Lockean Person Theory, Locke minds us the distinctions amongst "substance", "man" and "person". Man, is "nothing else but an animal of such a certain form" (p. 300), on the other hand, a person is "a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection" (Essay II.xxvii.8). From an anti-metaphysical point of view Locke refrains his person theory: The question being, what makes the same person, and not whether it be the same identical substance (Essay II.xxvii.10) In practice, apparently we can only assign legal and moral accountabilities to a "person" not a "man". It carries little justice if we assign punishment and merit to some persons else than the persons who commit those praiseful or condemnable actions.

In contemporary societies we take it for granted that we remain the same person over time; but in philosophy, this can hardly satisfy the question "How is this person the same person over some variation of time?" Or how can the same person exist at different times?

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<sup>1</sup> All references to Locke's *An Essay concerning Human Understanding*, here referred to by Essay, will be made to Penguin Classics edition, which is based on the fourth edition of the Essay, and will appear by book number.chapter number.section number.

Locke attempts to give an answer: for Locke, person X is the same person as person Y at time one is the same person if and only if X and Y can both remember exactly what Y was doing from inside, feeling and thinking. Memory is therefore, according to Locke, a necessary condition in maintaining personal identity. However, we all have experiences, in which cases our memories are interrupted and gaps filled with imaginations rather than facts. Then our personal identities, based on Lockean theories, are hardly flawlessly consistent. Referring to states of interrupted consciousness or forgetfulness. Though in the *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the word “consciousness” refers to the bond which maintains the sameness throughout some periods of time, if not the whole course of life. It means, in my opinion, more to memory rather than what we nowadays call “consciousness”. It seems the burden of maintaining personal identity falls solely on the ability to remember. “That with which the consciousness of this present thinking thing can join itself, makes the same person, and is one self with it, and with nothing else; and so, attributes to itself and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no further, and no further; as everyone who reflects and perceives (Essay II.xxvii.16).”

Some readers will readily raise questions in cases when we genuinely do not recall our past actions, but prepared to accept full responsibilities, according to social conventions, legal and moral accountabilities. This reveals the true both purpose and application of personal identity. As Locke puts it, the term “person” is a “forensic term, appropriating Actions and their Merit.” (Essay II.xxvii.26) It cannot be more convincing that Lockean Persons are but moral beings, subjects of accountability.

Besides our inner desire to maintain the same person overtime, our society expects us to be the same person overtime. We are expected to keep our promises, carry out legal responsibilities for things we commit, contracts we sign and marriages we vow, etc. As

Locke call a rational being “person”, he expects that person bears legal and moral accountabilities, though there are some fundamental defects in Lockean personal identity, which solely chained and connected by memories.

Less concerned with the forensic application on this issue, David Hume thinks we are but “a bundle of impressions”. There is no doubt that Hume’s discussion of personal identity is heavily influenced by Locke, according what Hume says: the issue of personal identity “has become so great question in philosophy, especially of late years in England.” Hume adopts a rather skeptic approach: suppose it is the “impressions gives rise to the idea of self, then that impression must continue the same invariably the same through the whole course of lives...”, if we have a ‘sameness’, an enduring self. However, it is quite easy to assert that there hardly is any impression remains constant and invariable throughout some variation of time. All ideas are ultimately derived from impressions, and no impressions are ever persisting, therefore there cannot be any persisting idea of “self.” On the other hand, had there been something distinct from our *bodies*, and that *something* is invariably constant, it is only the same qualitatively if the perceivers are also the same. Both the perceiver and objects being perceived must be the same over some variation of time, in order to be the same. This condition can rarely be satisfied because “[...] our thought is still more variable than our sights.” (Treatise I.IV.6, 351)<sup>2</sup> and any change, however small it is, destroy the identity of an object. One analogy I can come up with, in another field of studies, hash() functions in computer science. Hash functions will only produce identical hash codes if and only if every little bit of information is identical. Even one bit of information has been modified, a distinct

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<sup>2</sup> All references to Hume’s *A Treatise of Human Nature*, here referred to by Treatise, will be made to Philp Wheelwright edition, and will appear by book number.chapter number.section number, page number

hashcode will certainly be produced, which has no correlation with the one produced to which we call “closely related” file.<sup>3</sup>

Then what is it when we call ourselves “the same” person after some period time? In fact, according to Hume, we are just “confused” by closely related objects. Had Locke been correct, resemblance could indeed maintain one’s personal identity smoothly “as if it contemplated one continued object. (Treatise I.IV.6, 352)” We fall into this mistake, which substitutes the notion of identity, even before we are aware of such mistake. We have the ability to perceive, based on perceptions our imaginations mistakenly lead us down to such the natural operation. In Hume’s time, the idea of identity is the opposite of diversity, stands for a persisting and invariable object over some variation of time, which we have above argued, does not exist. We claim the object is identical to this object before undergoing changes, Hume considers, we are just but confusing numerical and qualitative identity.<sup>4</sup>

“[As to causation] we may observe, that the true idea of the human mind, is to consider it as a system of different perceptions or different existences, which are link’d together by the relation of cause and effect, and mutually produce, destroy, influence, and modify each other. Our impressions give rise to their correspondent ideas; and these ideas in their turn produce other impressions... as the same individual republic may not only change its members, but also its laws and constitutions; in like manner the same person may vary his character and disposition, as well as his impressions and ideas, without losing his identity. Whatever changes he endures, his several parts are still connected by the relation of causation.” (Treatise I.IV.6, 358)

So a person, in Hume’s view, is something more than a Lockean person, who solely maintains his identity by his memories; more like a chain of different perceptions, connected

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<sup>3</sup> For further discussion on hashing algorithms in computer science see McKenzie et al. *Selecting a hashing algorithm*, Software: Practice and Experience, 1990

<sup>4</sup> See Speaks, *Hume on Identity over Time and Persons*, *Prejudice*, 3 Oct. 2006

to one another by cause and effect. In fact, Hume only gives credits to resemblances and causation credits for retaining our personal identities, “[...]and must drop contiguity, which has little or no influence in the present case. (Treatise I.IV.6, 352)” Hume definitely does not adopt the Lockean theory and pass on the responsibility of retaining our personal identities on memory alone. Rather than memory itself, memory is more important in establishing “any notion of causation (Treatise I.IV.6, 359).”

What maintains ourselves as to be “the same” person, is the bond which connects several parts of us. In the case of personal identities, our “several parts” are connected by “the relation of causation (Treatise I.IV.6, 359).” In my understanding, if I may paraphrase Hume’s ideas on personal identity, I may paraphrase as follows: memory does not play a sufficient role in maintaining personal identities, but invoke the notion of causation. With causation and effect, of cause, different perceptions are linked together, and “mutually produce, destroy, influence and modify each other. (Treatise I.IV.6, 358)” As Hume puts it, “Identity depends on the relations of ideas, and these relations produce identity, by means of the easy transition... (Treatise I.IV.6, 360)” Since the transitions between successive objects may be as small as insensible degrees, we fall into the natural propensity to think we have an everlasting identity, but in fact not. “Personal identity can never possibly be decided... (Treatise I.IV.6, 360)” Hume realises in the nature of the question related personal identity; but unlike Locke, Hume avoids broaching scenarios where personal identities carry moral and legal accountabilities, which was Locke’s main motive to examine this issue in the first place.

At this stage of my paper, it is hopeful then, to reflect on underlying moral philosophies of Hume’s and Locke’s theories. Hume’s philosophy is heavily based on human nature. Provided his moral theories can be found in human nature, we receive additional help

to answer the question why a distinction between persons and human organisms is hard to fit into a philosophical framework. Whilst Locke's notion of accountabilities closely tied to punishment and reward in the context of a divine Last Judgment. Interestingly Hume's philosophy replaces divine reward and punishment by social blame and praise.<sup>5</sup>

Ultimately I believe we accept the notion of a persisting self as a gregarious functioning person in the society founded on law and order. As Go has put it in his study *Amnesia and criminal responsibility*, because “many types of amnesia develop after the criminal conduct”, “courts insist on treating amnesia under the insanity framework, or refuse to address it altogether even though it affects the procedural fairness of the trial.” It seems then, within current legal and moral system, to everyone's benefit, better to believe we do have and keep personal identities, at least for the purpose of accountabilities. However reasonable or unreasonable, logical or illogical in the light of philosophy, we ascribe personal responsibilities based on ideas of personal identity. Coming back to scenario I raised in the beginning of my paper, whether the girl is truly the same girl after she dyed her hair to a new colour, according to Locke, I shall say she was the same person because she retained a chain of memories of her past feelings. According to Hume, she was not necessarily the same person because her mind perceived new ideas in a perpetual flux, both she and I were just confused by several closely connected *her* and acquiesce in an “enduring person”. However, the term “person” also has forensic functionality; she, along with the majority mankind who participate in society, was expected to be responsible for her actions.

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<sup>5</sup> For further discussion see Boeker *Locke and Hume on Persons and Personal Identity: A Moral Difference*, University at Albany (SUNY)



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