

Individual identity:
locke on the
"sameness of a
being"



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In defining "sameness of a being", Locke distinguishes between the idea of the "same man" and the "same person". Although he acknowledges that the words are often used interchangeably, he states that "person" is in fact representative of personal identity, which is defined by consciousness alone, and is completely separate from the material body. Each individual has a personal identity defined by his unique motions or thoughts; although two people may make the "same" motion, or have the "same" thought, each thought or motion is actually distinct because it occurs at a different time and/or in a different place. Each person distinguished from another by his diversity of experience; as such, one can identify a person based on the experiences about which he is conscious. Locke's account of personal identity is open to several criticisms: one, that it violates transitivity, and two, that it is a circular argument. Each person, according to Locke, is "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places" (Ariew & Watkins 321). Each person is able to do this because they possess consciousness, which goes hand-in-hand with thought. When a person perceives something, he is aware that he perceives it, and therefore Locke argues that one cannot think without being conscious of it. It is through this consciousness that a person knows that he is, indeed, himself: "By this everyone is to himself that which he calls self" (AW 322). He is, therefore, able to distinguish himself from all other thinking beings. In this manner, a person can both define his personal identity as distinct and also use it to determine the sameness of his personal identity over time, regardless of the changes that take place in the body in which his consciousness presently resides. In defining identity, there are two types of philosophers: absolute

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identity theorists, who believe that for a person to be himself every aspect of his self, including the people around him, must remain the same, and relative identity theorists, who allow for a more lenient view of identity. As a relative identity theorist, Locke argues that not all aspects of a man are required to be unchanging for his identity to remain the same. He asserts that if some X exists that is both F and G, and some Y exists that is also both F and G, then it is possible for F of X to be equal to F of Y, despite the fact that G of X is not equal to G of Y. Take, for example, a man who at one moment in time possesses all of his limbs. Let X represent the composite of his mind and body at this time. Now imagine at a second moment in time, when this man has lost an arm and now possesses only one. Allow Y to represent the composite of his mind and body at time two. If F is taken to be the man's mind, and G is taken to be his body (as defined by its set of physical simples), it can be said that X and Y are the same F, but not the same G. Therefore, although the man has become a different substance, he remains the same person so long as his remaining parts are united by the same consciousness that once united all his parts. The proof of this sameness, Locke reasons, lies in memory. Just as man can know at one particular moment that he is himself, based on that which his consciousness identifies as "himself", he is also able to assert that his identity reaches as far back as his consciousness can recall. That is, if he remembers being himself in the past, and exists now with the same consciousness as he did previously, the self that now reflects on the past person is, in fact, the same person. Locke points out one problem in his argument: that over the course of a man's life, his consciousness is regularly interrupted by forgetfulness, and he is not always able to reflect on the past. At these moments, when a

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man loses sight of his past self, Locke acknowledges that it is doubtful whether the man retains his sense of self. He equates this with substance, however, and argues that it has no effect on personal identity, which he sees as a question of " what makes the same person, and not whether it is the same identical substance which always thinks in the same person" (AW 323). According to Locke, so long as a man sustains the same mental life, he is the same person. If he now acts with the same consciousness that he acted with in previous times, his identity is preserved by the unity of a continuous life, regardless of his current substance. The two main objections to Locke's account of personal identity are the problems of transitivity and circularity. I will first address the former. By the law of transitivity, it would seem that if X is the same F as Y, and Y is the same F as Z, then X should be the same F as Z. The trouble, however, is that Locke's idea of memory does not seem to obey this law. For example, suppose a young boy steals a candy bar. He later grows into a law-abiding, honest young man, but can still remember being a young candy thief. Even later, the young man grows into a retired elderly man who can remember being the young man, but not the thieving child. The common-sense view of transitivity would argue that the old man is the same person as the young boy because although he does not remember being the young boy, it is enough that he remembers being the young man who remembered being the young boy. If Locke is taken literally, however, the boy and the young man are the same person, and the elderly man and the young man are the same person, but the elderly man is not the same person as the young boy. How can this be possible? It appears as though Locke is caught in a trap by this argument, and may have to concede that his account of personal identity violates transitivity. However, I find that it is <https://assignbuster.com/individual-identity-locke-on-the-sameness-of-a-being/>

possible to overcome the problem of transitivity. To begin with, if transitivity is being used to prosecute a crime, it is nearly impossible to prove. Locke argues that a person cannot be punished for something that he is not conscious of. In this case, the old man cannot be prosecuted for stealing the candy bar, since he does not recall being the boy that committed the crime. One argument for transitivity holds that since the elderly man recalls being the young man, and the young man recalled being the boy, the old man is guilty. However, since there is no way to prove that the young man remembered being the boy, or even that the old man remembers being the young man, this argument is useless. There is no way to prove the guilt of the old man. Furthermore, the argument of transitivity is rendered futile if its basic principles are undermined. That is, transitivity relies on the fact that the old man remembers being the young man. A large part of the young man, however, was his memory of existing as, and possessing the same consciousness as, the young boy. If the old man has no recollection of being the young boy, then it cannot be said that he truly possesses the same consciousness as the young man. Therefore, the old man is not the same person as the young man, and transitivity ends there. If, on the other hand, the old man does recall being the young boy, but has simply forgotten the event of stealing the candy bar, he can still be considered the same person as the young boy: he possesses the same consciousness, despite the fact that it has been interrupted by forgetfulness. In this case, I would argue that the man can, in fact, be punished for the crime of the young boy, even if Locke might argue otherwise. This brings us to the second, more extreme objection to Locke's argument: circularity. The problem of circularity rests in the question of whether the statement "remembers that" is factive, as "<https://assignbuster.com/individual-identity-locke-on-the-sameness-of-a-being/>

knows that" is. For a statement to be factive, it must rely on the truth of what is being stated. For example, if a person says that he " knows that it is raining", we can be sure that it actually is raining. This is a necessary truth in order for his statement to be considered knowledge. The question lies in whether the same can be said of the statement " remembers that". If a person says that he " remembers that it was raining last Monday", is it necessarily true that it rained at that time? On the one hand, if " remembers that" is not factive, Locke's account is too permissive, allowing that any later person can be made to be the same as any earlier person. In this example, if it seems to later person that he was the earlier person, then he was, but this can obviously not be true. This argument is reasonable but irrelevant; I believe that " remembers that" is factive, although it is often incorrectly used in instances where the appropriate phrase would perhaps be " thinks he remembers that". As such, it still seems permissive in the sense that it can be difficult to know the truth of a given situation; therefore, a later person may appear to be the same as an earlier person, even if he is, in fact, not. However, " to be" and " to appear to be" are two distinct ideas, and despite the possibility that a man may not be able to determine which is truly the case, the fact of the situation does not change. The truth may never be known, but there is still one truth. Locke argues that this truth is known to God, who has seen all that has actually transpired. Therefore, although " remembers that" may be used incorrectly, when stated properly it is indeed factive. With the consideration that " remembers that" is indeed factive, Joseph Butler charges in " The Analogy of Religion" (1997): one should really think it self-evident, that consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity, any more than <https://assignbuster.com/individual-identity-locke-on-the-sameness-of-a-being/>

knowledge, in any other case, can constitute truth, which it presupposes.

(_)Simply put, Butler attempts to shatter Locke's notion of identity by arguing that if "remembers that" is to be taken as a factive statement, memory cannot be used to define identity, as it presupposes the existence of the identity that is being reflected upon. If a man remembers that he has performed a specific action, and memory is factive, then he truly did perform that action, in which case he must already have possessed an identity before he was able to reflect upon it. This objection, while seemingly logical, is nevertheless not applicable to the issue at hand. Although it is true that for one to reflect upon a former identity, that identity must have existed to begin with, and therefore cannot be based solely on memory, this does not disprove Locke's account of the sameness of identity over time. Although the original identity must have been based on something more than memory, Locke's account of the sameness of identity says nothing of the identity itself. It is not necessary for the original identity to be rooted in memory, as this is not all that Locke relies on in his definition of personal identity as a whole (which will be discussed below). The question of sameness simply asks whether a man at Time A has the same personal identity as a man at Time B. Regardless of what this original identity was founded on (Locke argues that it is consciousness), the later memory of this self and the retention of the same consciousness possessed when the original action was performed, is proof that the man at Time B has the same personal identity as the man at Time A. For the sake of argument, let us eliminate the question of memory from our discussion of original personal identity. The man at Time A is a blank slate, watches an operation on television, and thinks that he could never become a doctor, since he feels sickened by the sight of blood. Let us take these

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perceptions and thoughts as representations of the man's personal identity. The man at the later time, Time B, reminisces about watching this program, and can recall his perceptions and feelings at the time. Memory was not needed to define the identity of the man, but was simply used to connect the man at Time A with the man at Time B. Furthermore, Butler's argument of circularity poses no problem to Locke's definition of identity as a whole because the defining of oneself does not rely solely on memory, but rather on consciousness in its entirety. Identity is based on a man's consciousness about that which he defines as himself based on his thoughts, actions, memories, and reactions. A person consists of all of these elements combined into a single identity, not of several discrete pieces of consciousness (recalling again that Locke allows for forgetfulness and times of sound sleep, and does not argue that it is necessary for all consciousness to remain the same for the person to be unchanged). Returning to the case of the old man, the young man, and the young boy, I think that it is important to distinguish between individual memories and a complete set of memories. As I argued earlier, if the old man recalls being the young boy and has simply forgotten the single instance of stealing the candy bar, he is still the same person. He still possesses the consciousness that makes him capable of such theft, and can therefore be held accountable for the actions of the young boy. Human beings are constantly losing memories and replacing them with new experiences, but they do not necessarily become different people. Substances constantly lose and gain particles and cells, but these pieces unite to form the same whole substance, so long as the change is continuous and successive, rather than abrupt and complete. The same is true of the components of personal identity. As long as a consciousness

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moves along a successive path and retains enough experiences to be considered the same consciousness (which I would define as understanding oneself and the world in relation to the same experiences and actions of a person), the self remains the same. If, however, the old man has somehow forgotten all aspects of his boyhood due, for example, to amnesia, he is no longer the same person he once was. His physical body has the same beginning in time and place as the boy's physical body, and so may be considered the same, but this is not true for his personal identity. The boy's personal identity began when he first began to experience and perceive (at the moment of conception or at the time of birth, depending on one's view of life), whereas the old man's began when the boy's ended: at the point in time and space that the amnesia began. The old man is a tabula rasa, as the boy once was, and his consciousness will now be shaped by entirely new experiences, having nothing to do with the consciousness and memories of the young boy. In this case, the man's self should only be examined from its starting point, and he cannot be punished for the actions of the boy. Bodies cannot act on their own, and so it is consciousness alone that makes up a person and dictates his actions. As such, it appears reasonable to punish the person and not the body.