

John lockes theory of personal identity philosophy essay



“ For should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince’s past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, ” accountable only for the prince’s actions; but who would say it was the same man?”

In this example Locke shows that the human body is not necessary in personal identity since you could have the same person in two different bodies. Since the physical body cannot maintain personal identity, Locke comes to the conclusion that it must be the psychological aspect of humanity that retains personal identity.

It is at this point that the emphasis of identity is placed on the psychological rather than the physical aspect of life as stated in Locke’s second book: “ This may show us wherein personal identity consists: not in the identity of substance, but... in the identity of consciousness” 3 Locke’s next point was to differentiate between a “ man” and a “ person.” He uses the example of a rational talking parrot and compares it to an organism with the same shape as a human being though; it is unable to “ engage in rational discourse.” 1 This thought experiment is used by Locke to demonstrate that rationality is not an essential part of a man. Since rational discourse was not a necessary part of man. Locke expressed identity using something else. Thus, Locke finally narrowed down the integral part of personal identity to consciousness. Locke’s definition of conscious is as follows: “ Consciousness is both a necessary and a sufficient condition for a morally vital sense of personal identity.” 3 Locke describes the essence of self as being their consciousness, which he states as something distinguishable for every thinking thing. This

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consciousness is described as the “sameness of a rational being.” The unique characteristic of consciousness is that allows it to retain personal identity is that it can “be extended backwards to any past action or thought.” It is this characteristic that Locke uses to explain his theory of personal identity. Locke also disagrees with the Cartesian view of the soul, which held that a man’s soul was of an entirely different essence than his body, focusing more on the connectedness of the same conscious thought. Therefore, Locke reaches the conclusion that personal identity can only be achieved through psychological continuity. As a result of this, psychological continuity relies only on the being’s ability to consciously look back on their previous existence and be able to distinguish between conscious thought and memory. This distinction is extremely important to because Locke is frequently ambiguous when dealing with both terms. When he refers to conscious memory, he implies that it represents the consciousness of a past experience. Conscious thought, on the other hand, involves perceiving that one perceives. Locke explains that when we “will” anything, we are always conscious of it. Psychological continuity, as Locke describes it, also insinuates that a person who exists at one time is indistinguishable with a person who exists at a second time only if the first person remembers some past experience that connects the second person to the second time. Therefore, Locke’s definition of personal identity centers around the continuity of the consciousness, which is able to relate past and present memories and retain some sense of self awareness.

Now that I have explained and given an analysis of Locke’s theory of personal identity, I will now evaluate the validity of Locke’s theory by proving

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that his account of personal identity is incorrect. Locke's arguments contain flaws from their conception. I have a great difficulty with Locke's statement of self-conscious awareness as the main constituent of personal identity since intrinsically that consciousness is available only to each unique 'self.' Due to this dilemma, third party juries will be subject to error in many cases. In order to further explain this point, I will divide my argument into two questions; what does personal identity consist of and how can one tell a person is the same? First, since Locke defined personal identity as a person's consciousness, I will use that as my basis for this argument. Thus, since we can only tell a person through their physical aspect, it becomes impossible to distinguish if someone else's consciousness resides in the person you are looking at. An example would be if a person robbed a bank but wasn't conscious of the fact that he performed the act in the first place. According to Locke, the man should be free of all charges since he wasn't the same person who robbed the bank. This however is preposterous if in a courtroom there is evidence of that person robbing the bank, the only exception being if the person could prove they lost consciousness throughout the event. Another error found within Locke's argument centers around the fact that even though a person can switch bodies, it is the consciousness that determines the identity of the bodies. Thus it is clear that while Locke's statements seem perfectly rational in theory, practically though, they have no weight. Another flaw found in Locke's argument, is in how he leaves out particular cases where his theory of psychological continuity cannot apply. First however, I must define the distinction between 'person' and 'man.'

Locke defines 'man' as a living body of some particular shape. A person, on the other hand, is "an intelligent thinking being that can know itself as itself

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the same thinking thing in different times and places.” 4An example of this would be humans who remain in vegetative conditions and show no mental faculties whatsoever. According to Locke’s description of personal identity these human beings are not considered “ persons” since nothing can be discovered from their past in order for that individual to define their psychological identity. Locke’s argument between ‘ man’ and ‘ person’ becomes too controversial since the definition of both terms can never truly be settled. In conclusion, after providing examples to counterclaim Locke’s argument that personal identity originates from psychological continuity it is clear that Locke’s view on identity is too flawed to be correct when defining identity for each person.

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