

# Relationship of memories to personal identity



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## Memories? Critical Part of Personal Identity

Memories is the way that allows people to be able to hold personal identity. Personal identity can be defined as a concept in which you develop over a long period of time that defines who I am? Personal identity answers the question “ Who am I?” and what makes me different from other people. They are the key part in what makes a person not question their own existence as anything else less than who they are. The fact that I still remember my days in elementary school playing tether ball with all the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> graders allows me to think that I have not changed so much and that I am still the same person who still enjoys the company of those wiser and older than me which help me learn about life. If there were no memories of what has happened to me in the past, there would be an emptiness feeling like something is greatly missing from my life. This feeling is what makes me do certain things today. A person’s identity can change greatly by having memories that could either be true or false. Memories seem to be an outlet that allows ourselves to know who we are and what we have done in life; they give us a sense of existence in the world. If memories are falsely implanted into another person’s would they still have the same sense of personal identity of the one whose memories were created by or would they still have their own memories and personal identity because it is a body with different memories? By persons this is referring to John Locke definition “ a being characterized by consciousness, rationality, and a moral sense, and traditionally thought of as consisting of both a body and a mind or soul” which allows a sense of identity to be in the persons. (Curnow, 2018)

Memories seem to hold on to the thought or idea of personal identity. This is thought to be true by the philosopher John Locke whose ideas can be summarized as “ He considered personal identity (or the self) to be founded on consciousness (viz. memory), and not on the substance of either the soul or the body” (Nimbalkar, 2011) which means that personal self no attachment to a certain body or even a soul. Neither the body nor the soul seem to be consciousness. Consciousness is an awareness of external and internal existence. The body and the soul cannot exist with an awareness otherwise there would be nothing. Memories, however, is a form of existence. Existence of a substance must be in a space and memories is the space where the idea of existence of a substance exist. The body and the soul are what houses the space of memories which is existence for substance such as identity, ideas, and thoughts to be found. Just think about anything that is ever thought of; it exists in our thoughts which is our consciousness but does not stay there for long. It immediately gets transferred into our memory which is a housing place for the thought.

Memories in a sense could be transferred into another person and the memories that would be transferred over would give personal identity to the person. Bernard William gives a hypothetical that “ suppose that there was some process to which two persons, A and B, could be subjected as a result of which they might be said – question – beggingly -to have *exchanged bodies* ” the people who has swapped bodies realized that they were struck with a feeling of uneasiness when doing things that were associated to the previous bodies. (Williams, 1973) Although their consciousness has switch over bodies, they still follow what was of their original bodies. Even though

he who was previously body A, can seem to be confronted as body B. There is an uneasiness because of the fact that “ the utterances coming from that body be taken as genuinely expressive of memories” are of the present experience and knowledge that should not run out of the original body. Apparently, introspection about the self needs no sensory quoted by Shoemaker who says, “ No one thinks that one is aware of beliefs and thoughts by having sensations or quasi-sense-experiences of them” which means that the self or personal identity is not because of the body and sensations felt by the body. (Shoemaker, 1994).

The Giver written by Lois Lowry is also another example hypothetically that by transferring memories onto another person their own personal identity is affected because of the fact that memories hold personal identity. An overview of the book and an idea to take away from it is that the book is about a boy name Jonas who is picked as “ the Receiver of Memory, a post that distinguishes himself from others and gives him authority.” (Lowry, 2011) Jonas begins by following all the procedures of the society and receives the memories from a person called the Giver. He finds his personal identity over one specific memory about the killing of babies. From one memory passed on from generation to generation it can be seen that memories can give way into what we believe and what makes us who we are.

A real-life example of how even if there is an enormous loss of memory people can still hold a sense of identity if the memory of a personal event which happened to be significant. H. M a man with a history of having really bad seizures had a surgery to remove parts of his hippocampus which

allowed him to not have seizures anymore. After the surgery H. M did not have the ability anymore to form new memories. After many decades however H. M was able to recall memories of his younger self where “ he tells of living in South Coventry, Connecticut, where he could go behind the house to shoot guns. He had a rifle, ‘ One with a scope!’ he says, always enthusiastic at this point in his story. ‘ And I had handguns too! A . 38 and a . 32’” (Hilts 1995) Although his ability to form new memories were gone he still held his memories of his younger self which means that memories in a way hold some sort of identity. He could be identified as a man who did not undergo a surgery which in turn lost all of his current or modern life, but a man who is the same as the one shooting the guns.

An argument to John Locke idea that memories house personal identity would be Reid seen to see a difference of memories. He was able to differentiate between two types of memories; a semantic memory which is our experience of the world through general knowledge and episodic memory which is personal past experience that occurred at a specific instance in time. To be able to remember something we often put ourselves in the time which the memory occurred by Reid states, ‘ Every man in his senses believes what he distinctly remembers, and everything he remembers convinces him that he existed at the time remembered’ (Reid 1785, p. 318). John Locke idea of how memory is personal identity implies that memory requires identity. It is because in memory we convince ourselves that we existed in the place in time when it was remembered, but what if that was not the case.

The problem is we can believe something as a memory when we existed there when, we did not take part in. This kind of memory is known as a quasi-memory and people believe that an event that happened to them in their mind which happens to be a disordered memory leads to an identity. This identity however is not a personal identity because over time there will be some sort of dissonance that appears to happen between the body and the mind. Personal identity is consistent over time and should not be changed even if something major happened and we were able to look at our previous selves. We should still recognize our previous selves as part of us even though it has changed a lot.

Looking at all the facts provided from many great people such as Locke, Williams, and Reid; I want to believe that memories seem to be a direct link to a part of self which allows us to have personal identity. Memories and experiences are a direct link to what makes people different from each other and even if they are transferred to each other just like in Williams hypothetical illustration there would be some sort of conflict or dissonance between the two individuals that went through the transferring of bodies. In the Giver it can be seen that memories even though they are not necessarily ours can still give us our own personal identity. Memories seem to hold what makes us who we are or who we once were. Just like how H. M lost his hippocampus the region of the brain for storing memories, he still associated himself as a person who is young and shot guns. Reid, however, brings up an interesting point that we existed in the time which the memory was formed. This could be false because of how our brain tricks ourselves into thinking that we were there and eventually our mind and body would know that this is

false because of a sense of uneasiness or dissonance between the body and the mind.

In conclusion, Locke argument seems to support the idea that memories are the link to the self which allows us to have personal identity and know that we are who we are. Memories are the key component that holds us to be true to ourselves either in the past or in the present. What we remember or do in the past is what makes us who we are today held by memories. Even if we transferred our memories into another individual the other individual would still feel unease as though this was not his own identity. The body and mind would still act like the original because of the memories it holds. Memories give personal identity which makes us human and give us feeling. They trigger a sense of nostalgia within individuals and help individuals grow into who they should be. Memories in a sense is our very form of existence in the world because even if people die they will live on in memories which leads to another person's personal identity.

#### Citations

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