

# [The importance of memory continuity philosophy essay](https://assignbuster.com/the-importance-of-memory-continuity-philosophy-essay/)

In this chapter I will demonstrate that memories are very important to our conception of ourselves and the identities of others, but are unreliable and not alone sufficient for ensuring the continuity of one’s identity. I believe that more psychological elements are required in instances where memories are erroneous or have been forgotten.

Consciousness is a difficult term to define though. Thomas Reid points out that we cannot be conscious of the past, as you can only ever be conscious of the present (Reid, p. 222). So perhaps Locke means it is our memories which make us the same person as we were yesterday. The problem with this is that I can remember what my flatmates were doing yesterday, but this does not make me identical with my flatmates. So it must only be first-person memory, from my own perspective, which demonstrates that I am identical with myself from yesterday. Joseph Butler objects that this results in a circular position, as having first-person memories implies my remembering that I performed those actions (Butler, p. 324). However, we can see that it would be possible for someone to wake up with amnesia, knowing what actions they had performed recently but with no idea who they are. Therefore, it is possible to separate first-person memory from identity. This is the position popularly attributed to Locke.

But does this mean that I cease to be myself when I sleep, or that when I temporarily forget that I went cycling yesterday I am no longer the person who went cycling yesterday? Locke would not believe this to be the case. As long as I remembered when I was prompted or woken up then I would still be the same person.

But what if I could not remember, even with prompting? For example, someone with Alzheimer’s disease may suffer loss of memory of recent events. There was also the case of David Fitzpatrick, who suffered a dissociative fugue at age 25, causing him to forget everything about his life before the fugue (Channel Five’s “ The Man With No Past”). As Locke’s theory of identity related to the responsibility of the agent, Locke would have to say that David Fitzpatrick could not be held responsible for any of the actions, good or bad, he had carried out prior to his fugue.

We are reluctant to accept that people are not responsible for actions they cannot recall committing. A distinction which needs to be drawn in Locke’s position on accountability is the difference between being conscious of an action now and being conscious of it when it was being committed. For example, (sleepwalker?) was not convicted of the murder of his father because he committed the crime while asleep. Since he was clearly not conscious of the actions he was performing, he was not held responsible for them. However, someone who intentionally hurts many people and later forgets what he has done should not be deemed innocent.

As this pertains to identity, we can see that there may be parts of our lives we can no longer recall. For example, most of us recall very little of our early childhood. Thomas Reid objects to this element of Locke’s theory of identity with a famous example. A young boy is flogged for stealing apples, grows up to become an officer and later becomes a general. The officer remembered being flogged, and the general remembers being an officer, but the general does not remember being flogged. According to Locke this means the general is not the same person as he was as a child. Reid argues, however, that identity is transitive (Reid, p. 249). This means that since the general remembers being an officer, and the officer remembers being flogged, the general is identical with the boy who was flogged, which means Locke’s response is nonsensical. But identity is not necessarily transitive. For example, the cup by my bed was full last night but this morning it is empty. This does not mean that the cup I see this morning is different to the one that was there last night. Not all qualities must remain the same in order for people and objects to be the same over time. The only aspect which Locke says must be consistent is our consciousness. (<- make sure this is all correct because I seem to remember it was wrong when I handed this essay in.)

A huge problem with Locke’s theory is the possibility that one may have memories which have become distorted over time, or altogether false. Memories are extremely fragile, and easily led by suggestions from others. For example,

Locke explains that, in the case of one who falsely suffers guilt for someone else’s crime, when we get to Heaven, God will ensure that the only memories we have and can be held responsible for are our own (Locke, p. 473). But in order for God to determine which memories are ours, he must be able to determine who we are. Locke is unable to explain how God determines this, and why we cannot use God’s criteria instead of Locke’s flawed system.

A similar problem for Locke is cases of amnesia, whereby a person forgets everything of their past. A new person may seem to emerge after the episode. But what if they later recovered their memory? Similarly, what happens to their old self during times of identity loss. Should we consider the old person to have died? But then when they return we could only consider them to have come back to life. So body needed to act as a kind of enclosure for the memories, allowing for some kind of continuity during times of memory or psychological loss.

Tan Tai Wei states that the unreliability of memories means that we need more in order to assure one’s identity. He claims that our bodies are necessary for the authentication of our memories. [http://www. springerlink. com/content/jm4072410n14l705/]. As demonstrated in previous chapters, the only important aspects of our body are the brain and our genetic make-up. Yet these do not seem to offer any reliable authentication of our memories. Instead, I believe that what we ourselves would deem important for the continuation of our identity is our psychology: our beliefs, opinions, attitudes and passions.

J. Butler, “ Analogy of Religion”, Harper and Brothers, New York, 1860.

J. Locke, “ An Essay Concerning Human Understanding”, (ed.) T. J. Cobden-Sanderson and J. F. Dove, Oxford University, Oxford, 1828.

T. Reid, “ Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man”, in: The Works of Thomas Reid, Vol. 1, (ed.) MacLaughlan and Stewart, Edinburgh, 1872.

“ The Man With No Past” 2006, television programme, Extraordinary People, Channel Five, UK, 15th November.