

Locke vs. Williams essay



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John Locke Vs. Bernard Williams In this essay, I will be explaining John Locke's case of the prince and the cobbler and Bernard Williams's second description of the A-body person and the B-body person. Bernard Williams has the correct analysis of the situation where the body is part of self-identity since it is inevitable for us to fear future pain. John Locke claims that memory is the key to identity, so "as far [as] someone's memory goes, is so far the identity of the person. (Campbell) First, Locke explains the concept of body swapping in terms of the prince and the cobbler: the "transfer of memories between the body of the prince and the body of the cobbler would mean the people have swapped bodies." (Campbell) In this example, the prince and the cobbler have their memories switched and everyone would see that the prince's body, now inhabited by the memories of the cobbler would be identified as the cobbler.

The same applies for the cobbler's body; we would agree that the cobbler would now be the prince since the memories are the continued consciousness (memory) of the prince. If I was the prince and asked to choose selfishly, which of these future people should I choose to be tortured and which to be rewarded? Locke would say, I should choose my present prince's body, to be tortured and my future cobbler's body, to be rewarded since Locke explains that memory alone makes up identity.

However, in Bernard Williams's second scenario of the A-body person and the B-body person, he argues that the body is needed for personal identity. William's key point is "...the principle that one's fears can extend to future pain, whatever psychological changes precede [the pain] seem positively straight forward." (198) Whatever psychological changes there are, we will

still care about our future pain. Williams starts off with John Locke's body swapping example, but then Williams asks, suppose that you are told that you would be tortured tomorrow.

In rational thought, it would seem appropriate to fear the upcoming torture. You are then told that before the torture, you will not remember anything before the torture since your memories will be taken away between now and the torture. Furthermore, you are also told that you will have another person's memories and character traits. Surely, not remembering that you will be tortured and having your memories replaced by someone else's memories, would not comfort you very much. Williams claims that this would not alleviate your fear in the least since you can imagine not remembering whom you are, where you are, why you are there, and finding yourself undergoing torture. If anything, this would increase your fear; and even more important is that it would still fear the future. " Williams says that nobody has changed bodies; all that has happened here is that there are two unfortunate individuals, both of whom have gone mad. " (Campbell) The prince now has delusions of being a cobbler and the cobbler has delusions of being the prince: same human being, same person.

Williams claims that if I, the prince, chose my body to be tortured, I " would be selecting my own future pain, even though a set of delusions" (Campbell) has taken me over. Williams says this is an equally legitimate way of describing the situation as Locke's way of describing it; the description given seems to matter a great deal here. The two cases are related in that they are the same exact situation. Locke and Williams both use two people in

which they will swap memories. However, the way they describe it, makes it entirely different.

Locke focuses on the prince's thoughts because in his view, memory is crucial to the judgment of who gets the reward and who gets the punishment. Williams adds in the knowledge of future pain and it makes the case seem different because now, the person with the knowledge of future pain is scared to choose their current body to be tortured. Therefore, the body must be connected to identity. In objection to Williams's second case, he does not tell you that the person whose memories and character traits that you will be given, will in turn be given your memories and character traits.

William objects this with, why would that matter; " why should [I] mention this man and what is going to happen to him? My selfish concern is to be told what is going to happen to me, and now I know: torture, preceded by changes of character, brain operations, [and] changes in impressions of the past" (189). The only thing that I am thinking about is my future pain.

Another objection is that this principle may not always apply. For example, if I were afraid of heights and told I was going to be put on top on a high cliff soon, I would definitely be nervous and afraid.

However, if I were told I was going to be totally cured of my fear of heights before the event of the cliff, I would no longer be afraid of the cliff. But, pain is not the same as acrophobia. Pain is universally felt and passed down from our ancestors to help us survive, unless you have a genetic defect where you can't feel pain, heat, or cold. We are born with a natural instinct to avoid

pain so again; the claim stands that “ fears can extend to future pain whatever psychological changes precede it” (198).

Furthermore, I might be fearful of changes even though the result will be pleasant: If I were told I would be wonderfully happy for the rest of my life only after I get a lobotomy. I would definitely be fearful of my future, despite the happiness at the end. (Campbell) So, Williams’s second description of the A- body and B- body case, would lead the rational, selfish A- body in Locke’s scenario to choose that the A- body person to receive the reward and the B- body person the torture. The A- body person would choose the A- body to receive the reward because personal identity is also bodily continuity.

In conclusion, John Locke and Bernard Williams use the same case but describe it in two distinct ways. Locke describes memory as identity and says if body swapping happened, we would identify our self in accordance to our memories. Williams says that self-identity cannot include just memory itself, but also the body. If I were told that I were going to experience pain in the future, it would be reasonable for me to fear that future pain that would happen to my body. Therefore, Bernard Williams has the correct analysis of self-identity.