

John Locke: Essay on Human Understanding

Book II, Chapter XXVII, Of Identity and Diversity, Excerpts¹

PHIL101

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updated: 9/17/13 12:04 PM

Section II: What is the Self?

Reading II.4

John Locke (1632-1704) was an English philosopher of the 17th Century. Locke lived in an age of great change in both England and in Europe in general. In England, the 17th Century saw revolutions resulting in the deposition and execution of monarchs, the rule of the puritan Oliver Cromwell, and the restoration of monarchy in the Glorious Revolution. Locke played an important role in defining political theories that would prove important for the following centuries: he asserted the natural rights of man and the right of governance only via the consent of the governed. The 17th Century also saw the rise of science in England and throughout Europe. Locke was trained as a physician and with Newton and others helped to establish the Royal Society devoted to science.

As a physician and scientist, Locke's approach to knowledge was as an empiricist. His method was to collect information by careful observation of the world and to draw such conclusions as the resulting data warranted. His account of the self, thus, tends to be more circumspect than that of the rationalist Descartes, whose work Locke knew. Where Descartes's rationalist method enables stronger claims about the metaphysics of the self, Locke is more cautious. Where Descartes asserted the existence of a thinking substance, the soul, as the essence of the self, Locke reported rather on the evident abilities or behavior of the self. Central to these is the consciousness of the self, indeed, its *self*-consciousness. This capacity, Locke finds, is equivalent to what we mean by 'self'.

Note Locke's attention to our words: what we say and how we say it. These constitute a significant portion of the data underlying his account of the self. Other information pertinent to his account derives from consideration of our mental states and our bodies as we find them engaged in the world around us.

As Locke begins his examination of the self, he notes our use of several associated concepts. We refer to ourselves as *beings* or what Locke calls *substances* and we also refer to ourselves as *humans* (where Locke uses the term *men*). Further, we sometimes employ the term *person*.

It is not therefore unity of substance that comprehends all sorts of identity, or will determine it in every case; but to conceive and judge of it aright, we must consider what idea the word it is applied to stands for: it being one thing to be the same SUBSTANCE, another the same MAN, and a third the same

¹ Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. Project Gutenberg:

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PERSON, if PERSON, MAN, and SUBSTANCE, are three names standing for three different ideas; ... (*Essay* II.XXVII.8)²

By 'substance', Locke means a being in general. And it is true that the self is a being, but this will not help us to distinguish the self from other beings that exist. The concept *man* comes closer to what the self is, but Locke finds that in ordinary use, this term refers primarily to our biological or physical nature. Man – i.e., the human being – is a certain kind of animal:

An animal is a living organized body; and consequently the same animal, as we have observed, is the same continued LIFE communicated to different particles of matter, as they happen successively to be united to that organized living body. And whatever is talked of other definitions, ingenious observation puts it past doubt, that the idea in our minds, of which the sound man in our mouths is the sign, is nothing else but of an animal of such a certain form. Since I think I may be confident, that, whoever should see a creature of his own shape or make, though it had no more reason all its life than a cat or a parrot, would call him still a MAN; or whoever should hear a cat or a parrot discourse, reason, and philosophize, would call or think it nothing but a CAT or a PARROT; and say, the one was a dull irrational man, and the other a very intelligent rational parrot. (*Essay* II.XXVII.9)

Note the application of Locke's empirical method. If we consider how we use our words, and consider what we use them to refer to, we find that what we mean by 'man' (or 'human') is a certain form of life, one that undergoes change in constitution over time, and one that may vary widely in point of intelligence. Contrast this approach with that of Descartes, who might have analyzed the concept of man to determine what it told us about the self.

In any case, for Locke, we are beings and we are humans, but that is not the end of the matter. This leaves us with the third concept, that of *person*: as we use the terms, the self is a person, Locke finds, generally speaking. Our use of the terms suggests to him the following account:

This being premised, to find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what PERSON stands for;—which, I think, 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; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without PERCEIVING that he does perceive. (*Essay* II.XXVII.11)

Locke's account here of the person is complex and so requires patient analysis if we are to understand it. The person, as Locke observes it, is "a thinking intelligent being", where such a being "has reason and reflection" and can, furthermore, "consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places." Like Descartes, Locke focuses on our thinking nature and in particular on our consciousness of ourselves, our self-consciousness. We are a thinking, rational being *with reflection* – i.e., we can turn our rational thought upon ourselves, reflect what is otherwise outwards thought inwards towards the self, the subject of thought. And in so doing, we are capable of a crucial judgment, where the self (or person) is concerned: a person can "consider itself as itself". That is, it can recognize that the "self" *doing* the thinking is the very same thing as the "self" being thought *about*.

Before continuing our analysis of this idea, let us consider further Locke's notion of consciousness. What is the "consciousness which is inseparable from thinking," exactly? Consciousness per se we may express also with the word 'awareness'. To be conscious is to be aware. We are conscious – aware – of heat and of cold, of sights and sounds, of the contents of our own thoughts. More specifically, the form of consciousness that Locke is interested in is *self-consciousness*: *reflective* consciousness, consciousness directed upon itself. Many living beings appear to have consciousness of some sort. It is only the higher animals, those with greater intelligence, evidently, that are conscious also of their consciousness. This self-awareness is the essence of Locke's account of the self, which he continues to develop as follows:

² The emphasis in CAPS is in Locke's original, here and below.

Locke on the Self

When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is to himself that which he calls SELF:—it not being considered, in this case, whether the same self be continued in the same or divers substances. For, since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done. (*Essay II.XXVII.11*)

The capacity to form the self-conscious identity judgment is evidently independent of the material constitution of the body. I am made up of slightly different “stuff” today as compared with the stuff that composed me yesterday. Yet I am able to judge, reflecting on my actions yesterday, that *that person* who yesterday washed his car is *the same person* as who today considers that memory. Indeed, Locke asserts that any “self” that I encounter in memory is judged identical with the present, remembering self. In each case, self-consciousness entails that I identify the remembering self with the remembered self: they are one and the same thing, numerically identical.

But it is further inquired, whether it be the same identical substance. This few would think they had reason to doubt of, if these perceptions, with their consciousness, always remained present in the mind, whereby the same thinking thing would be always consciously present, and, as would be thought, evidently the same to itself. But that which seems to make the difficulty is this, that this consciousness being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of our lives wherein we have the whole train of all our past actions before our eyes in one view, but even the best memories losing the sight of one part whilst they are viewing another; and we sometimes, and that the greatest part of our lives, not reflecting on our past selves, being intent on our present thoughts, and in sound sleep having no thoughts at all, or at least none with that consciousness which remarks our waking thoughts,—I say, in all these cases, our consciousness being interrupted, and we losing the sight of our past selves, doubts are raised whether we are the same thinking thing, i.e. the same SUBSTANCE or no. Which, however reasonable or unreasonable, concerns not PERSONAL identity at all. The question being what makes the same person; and not whether it be the same identical substance, which always thinks in the same person, which, in this case, matters not at all: different substances, by the same consciousness (where they do partake in it) being united into one person, as well as different bodies by the same life are united into one animal, whose identity is preserved in that change of substances by the unity of one continued life. For, it being the same consciousness that makes a man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed solely to one individual substance, or can be continued in a succession of several substances. For as far as any intelligent being CAN repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same personal self. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is SELF TO ITSELF now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness can extend to actions past or to come; and would be by distance of time, or change of substance, no more two persons, than a man be two men by wearing other clothes to-day than he did yesterday, with a long or a short sleep between: the same consciousness uniting those distant actions into the same person, whatever substances contributed to their production. (*Essay II.XXVII.12*)

It is consciousness that determines whether any two given things are in fact instances of the same one self. If I am conscious of a prior self cutting the grass or washing the car, then that remembered self is identical, numerically, with me. A similar conclusion is drawn by Locke concerning the body and its relationship to the self.

That this is so, we have some kind of evidence in our very bodies, all whose particles, whilst vitally united to this same thinking conscious self, so that WE FEEL when they are touched, and are affected by, and conscious of good or harm that happens to them, are a part of ourselves; i.e. of our thinking conscious self. Thus, the limbs of his body are to every one a part of himself; he sympathizes and is

concerned for them. Cut off a hand, and thereby separate it from that consciousness he had of its heat, cold, and other affections, and it is then no longer a part of that which is himself, any more than the remotest part of matter. Thus, we see the SUBSTANCE whereof personal self consisted at one time may be varied at another, without the change of personal identity; there being no question about the same person, though the limbs which but now were a part of it, be cut off. (*Essay II.XXVII.13*)

As long as I am conscious of one or another part of my body, that part is included in what I am. When I feel something touch my hand, I experience that feeling as *me* being touched. I judge: the person having a sensation in its hand is the same person as is now considering the question of who is having a sensation in its hand. My body is part of me as long as I am conscious of it – or, more precisely, it is part of me as long as I am conscious of being conscious *with* it.

Locke draws out several interesting consequences of this account of the self. We seem inclined to say that were the consciousness of one person to leave its own to enter somehow the body of another, displacing the second body's consciousness, we should then say that that first person has come to be in a new body.

And thus may we be able, without any difficulty, to conceive the same person at the resurrection, though in a body not exactly in make or parts the same which he had here,—the same consciousness going along with the soul that inhabits it. But yet the soul alone, in the change of bodies, would scarce to any one but to him that makes the soul the man, be enough to make the same man. 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, every one 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? The body too goes to the making the man, and would, I guess, to everybody determine the man in this case, wherein the soul, with all its princely thoughts about it, would not make another man: but he would be the same cobbler to every one besides himself. I know that, in the ordinary way of speaking, the same person, and the same man, stand for one and the same thing. And indeed every one will always have a liberty to speak as he pleases, and to apply what articulate sounds to what ideas he thinks fit, and change them as often as he pleases. But yet, when we will inquire what makes the same SPIRIT, MAN, or PERSON, we must fix the ideas of spirit, man, or person in our minds; and having resolved with ourselves what we mean by them, it will not be hard to determine, in either of them, or the like, when it is the same, and when not. (*Essay II.XXVII.17*)

And similarly, were I to have memories that could only have been of a long-dead man, Lock suggests, I should be said in fact to have been the very one to have performed the acts of that man.

But though the same immaterial substance or soul does not alone, wherever it be, and in whatsoever state, make the same MAN; yet it is plain, consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended—should it be to ages past—unites existences and actions very remote in time into the same PERSON, as well as it does the existences and actions of the immediately preceding moment: so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they both belong. Had I the same consciousness that I saw the ark and Noah's flood, as that I saw an overflowing of the Thames last winter, or as that I write now, I could no more doubt that I who write this now, that saw the Thames overflowed last winter, and that viewed the flood at the general deluge, was the same SELF,—place that self in what SUBSTANCE you please—than that I who write this am the same MYSELF now whilst I write (whether I consist of all the same substance material or immaterial, or no) that I was yesterday. For as to this point of being the same self, it matters not whether this present self be made up of the same or other substances—I being as much concerned, and as justly accountable for any action that was done a thousand years since, appropriated to me now by this self-consciousness, as I am for what I did the last moment. (*Essay II.XXVII.18*)

For Locke, observation suggests the following account of the self: First, the same one human is not composed of the same stuff over time, but is made up of different substances – or compilations of substances – over time. We speak of the same human, or the same one life even as we distinguish the material composition of the living human from one time to another.

Second, on Locke's account, a person (or self) is not the same one substance over time, whether this be a physical or a mental substance, nor is a person even necessarily the same one human being over time. A person is associated with different bodies at different times, and this could apply to bodies making up different persons at different times. Neither is there evident in Locke's view a Cartesian subject of consciousness that remains one and the same over time. Rather, for Locke, and third, a person is a self-consciousness, i.e., a capacity to self-identify either at a single given time – synchronically – or across time – diachronically.

Third, for Locke, a person (or self) is a self-conscious being. As we have seen, self-consciousness involves consciousness of our consciousness, being aware of being aware. There may be an ambiguity, however, in the term 'self-conscious' as Locke uses the term. 'Self-consciousness' could mean either of the following: being conscious of a "self", on the one hand, or being conscious of a consciousness, on the other. The question here is whether these two expressions mean the same thing. This question may also be put by asking after the meaning of 'self' in Locke's usage. We can use this term in either of two ways. One use of 'self' is purely the formal matter of a reflected or returned motion or action. A light ray, for instance, may be reflected back on "itself". In this sense of the term, 'self' entails nothing more about the ray of light than what is already contained in the idea of light. If this is Locke's meaning, then self-consciousness amounts the reflection of consciousness upon itself – i.e., consciousness only of consciousness. On the other hand, we may use the term 'self' to refer to something more substantial than is intended in the formal, reflective meaning. Here, we may speak of a "soul" or of Descartes's "thinker". 'Self-consciousness', in this sense, means not just a reflected consciousness, but a consciousness of some particular being. Consider these two possible meanings to the term and what they mean for our interpretation of Locke's account of the self. In our next reading, David Hume will exploit this opening in the empiricist's account of the self.

Ask Yourself

1. What, exactly, is the self, on Locke's account?
2. How is Locke's empiricist method revealed in his investigation of the self? How does his method differ from that of Descartes?
3. Locke suggests that if you remember performing the acts that we otherwise attribute to Napoleon, then you did in fact perform those acts. Do you agree or disagree with this claim? Why/not?