

Locke on Personal Identity¹

1. Three Uses of Terms Like 'Identity'

1. To refer to a *self-conception*. E.g: 'My fascination with philosophy threatens my identity as an experimental scientist'.
2. To refer to the relation that holds between things that share many intrinsic properties. E.g: "These two paper clips are identical." We may call this *qualitative identity*.
3. To refer to the relation that holds between each thing and itself, and nothing else. We may call this *strict identity*.

Questions about strict identity typically come up when you know that there is one thing with features F, and that there is one thing with features F*, and you ask: "Is the thing with features F the thing with features F*?"

Examples: Is the youngest person in this room the tallest person in this room?
Is the third perfect number the 28?

2. Strict Identity Over Time

We're going to be interested in strict identity but *across time*.

Questions about strict identity across time come up when you know that there is one thing with features F at time t_1 , and that there is one thing with features F* at a later time t_2 , and you ask: "Is the thing with features F at t_1 the thing with features F* at t_2 ?"

Examples: Is the shirt you're wearing the one I gave you for your birthday?
Is the person I saw at the coffee shop this morning the same as the person I sat next to on the airplane yesterday?

We care a great deal about questions of the identity of *persons* over time:

- Is the person I am pointing at now a person who will be given a million dollars tomorrow?
- Is the person I am pointing at now going to be suffering from a horrible illness next year?
- Is the person I am pointing at now one of the people who will be alive tomorrow?
- Is the person on trial today the person who committed the murder three months ago?

3. Locke's Criterion of Persistence Over Time

For Masses

Whenever A is mass that exists at one time, t_1 , and B is a mass that exists at a later time, t_2

A is B iff every part of A at t_1 is a part of B at t_2 , and vice-versa

¹ Parts of this handout are taken from a handout made by Professor Caspar Hare.

Locke's Criterion of Persistence Over Time for Organisms ('Vegetables', 'Animals', 'Man')

Whenever A is an organism that exists at one time, t_1 , and B is an organism that exists at a later time, t_2

A is B iff A and B 'partake in the same life, though that life be communicated to new particles of matter vitally united to the living [organism]'

In other words: there is a kind of organizational continuity that exists between an organism at different times which is what makes it a single organism.

(Compare: a club, 24.00)

Locke's Criterion of Persistence Over Time for People

Whenever A is person who exists at one time, t_1 , and B is a person who exists at a later time, t_2

A is B iff at t_2 , B remembers A's actions and experiences at t_1 .

(Note: in what follows theories of personal identity over time will assume that A is a person who exists at t_1 and B is a thing that exists at a later time, t_2).

4. Objections to Locke from Reid and some Modifications

Objection 1: He 'Mistakes Testimony for the thing Testified'

According to Locke, my remembering doing something makes it the case that I did it. But isn't that objectionably circular? Isn't it part of the concept of remembering that I only remember the things I did?

Modification to Avoid Reid's First Objection

Say that I *quasi-remember* doing something when I am in a mental state that is intrinsically just like the one I would be in if I remembered doing it.

A is B iff at t_2 , B quasi-remembers A's actions and experiences at t_1 .

Objection 2: Locke is Saying that Strict Identity is Intransitive

Say that a relation is *transitive* when, for all things x, y, z , if x bears the relation to y , and y bears the relation to z , then x bears the relation to z .

Strict identity is a transitive relation. But, when lives are long and memory is short (e.g. the boy, young officer, general), remembering is intransitive. The general remembers being the young officer, the young officer remembers being the boy, but the general does not remember being the boy. So Locke cannot be giving a criterion of strict identity.

Modification to Avoid Reid's Second Objection

Say that A's mental state at t_1 is *memory connected* to B's mental state at t_2 iff at t_2 , B quasi-remembers being A at t_1

Say that A at t is *memory continuous* with B at t' (the *ancestral* of the forward memory connected relation) iff either

A at t is memory connected to B at t' ,

or
there is a chain of persons C1, C2, C3...Cn that exist at times $t < t_1 \dots t_{n-1} < t_n < t'$,
such that

- A is memory connected to C1, and
- For all i, C_i is memory connected to C_{i+1}, and
- C_n is memory connected to B.

A is B iff at t₁ A is memory continuous with B at t₂.

5. Should The Criterion Only Focus on Memory?

Locke argued that personal identity is a concept we use it to guide our practice of blaming and punishing: *only blame and punish a person for crimes he/she committed.*

And, says Locke, we should only blame and punish people for crimes they remember perpetrating.

But is Locke right about this?

And isn't Locke overlooking other important maxims?

Absent some exchange, attribute property to a person only if he/she is the previous owner.

Anticipate pleasure and suffering only if it will be yours.

Fear death only if you will not be around in the future.

The Amended Broader Version of the Psychological Criterion of Persistence for People

Say that A's mental state at t₁ is *psychologically connected* to B's mental state at t₂ iff B's mental state at t₂ has many desires, beliefs, memories in common with A's mental state at t₁, and A's mental state at t₁ causes B's mental state at t₂ to be as it is.

Let *psychological continuity* be the ancestral of the *psychological connectedness* relation.

A is B iff A's mental state at t₁ is psychologically continuous with B's mental state at t₂.

6. Some other Theories of Personal Identity Over Time

The Soul Criterion

A is B iff the soul A has at t₁ is the soul B has at t₂

The Bodily Criterion

A is B iff the body A has at t₁ is the body B has at t₂

The Brain Criterion

A is B iff the brain A has at t₁ is the brain B has at t₂

Locke's objections to the bodily criterion: the prince and the cobbler, Socrates and the mayor of Queensborough. Similar objections might apply to the soul and brain criterion.

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