
The Metaphysics and the Paradox of Identity in Locke's Theory of Personal Identity

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Abstract

Several interpretations have been given to the meaning of the term 'identity'. The work examines the meaning of identity and the metaphysics of identity, especially as it relates to the paradox of the ship of Theasus. When we say two things are identical/same, what exactly do we mean? How are two things exactly the same? The aim in the work is to provide or make explicit the answers to these questions using Locke's theory of personal identity as our conceptual framework. The work employed the method of analysis and argued that the term identity is more problematic as it applies to humans and nonhumans in varying senses. It concluded that personal identity debate can be approached not only intrinsically but also extrinsically.

Keywords: identity, personal identity, consciousness, & person

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Introduction

The aim of this work essentially is to x-ray the meaning of the metaphysics and paradox of identity in John Locke's theory of personal identity. The metaphysics of identity not so much border on whether persons share semblance in terms of their essences and substance/nature but that which constitute the being of a thing; that is, what makes a thing a thing over time. What exactly makes a thing, a thing as different from other things? This question is germane for two reasons— first, the discussion of what we really are (either as a metaphysical being or a material being) is still on-going and more recent debates and arguments have emerged to explain the dynamic nature of the human person from where Locke left it. Secondly, the lack of apparent settlement/conclusion of the issue of whether the human nature is fixed or not. Without sufficiently delineating these two, it would be difficult to ascertain if Locke's idea of consciousness clearly constitutes the identity of person over time.

For this reason, it has been argued that “if ... our nature is not fixed and we can create, at least in part, who we are, then personhood and personal identity should be approached more as open-ended project than as realities determined by factors independent of the choices we make.” Until we have successfully resolved whether the human nature is fixed or not, we may

not successfully come to terms with what personality the human person is and why Locke thought it to be consciousness. However, this paper is not aimed at resolving the precise nature of the human being; rather it is aimed at analyzing the idea of identity and the paradox of identity in Locke.

We must bear in mind that in a way the problem of personal identity may be seen as the search for the criteria of identity of persons. In other words, what criteria best explain the identity conditions of persons? What criteria best re-identifies a person? Under what condition(s) can a person be distinguished from non-person? Burn explains the crux of the matter and the quest of the philosophers in the field of personal identity thus: “it is the criterion of personal identity in the sense of the necessary and sufficient conditions of personal identity that philosophers are seeking.” Thus, in this paper, an attempt will be made to succinctly conceptualize the some of the theories of personal identity. First, let us begin by explicating the meaning of personal identity.

The meaning of personal identity has been approached differently. Locke's approach shall be taken as our conceptual framework. Ontologically, to assert that a person is composed of this idea or that idea requires a thorough analysis. More so, the emerging debate on transgender and occurrence of personal transformation call for important re-vision of our idea of who and what a person is, that is, a consideration of metaphysical and physical stand-points. It is for this reason we are going to argue in this thesis that mental configuration and psychological approach alone in the determination of a person's identity as Locke would make us accept does not undoubtedly guarantee and exhaust the problematic inherent in conceptualizing and explaining the change a person is capable of surviving and remaining the same.

More so, relying on the argument of the *physicalism* approach proponents of personal identity neither resolves the same problematic nor apparently explicates the changes humans are capable of surviving. Although the human senses—touch, sight, taste, hearing and smelling are somewhat indications that he/she is a physical being yet the mental component of the human being quickly draws attention to the fact that a person is not completely material. This is to an extent true “because to be a person is to at once and inextricably both a biological entity and an individual with a mental, moral, and social life, experiences of personal transformation often has concomitant effects on one's nature as a physical being.”

A philosopher's conception of a person and by extension the persisting nature of a human person and more so of a non-human person are to a large extent depended on the school of thought and philosophical orientation or background of the theorist. Little wonder why there are divergent theories of personal identity. These theories are of large-scale proportions; beneath it are also other micro-theories. Before we launch fully into the heart of this discourse, attempt will be made to provide a rational conceptualization of what personal identity is, by dissecting each word and analyzing them.

What is Personal Identity?

A conceptual clarification is necessary in order to illuminate or reinforce the meaning of the terms, “personal” and “identity”. The term 'personal' implies or connotes something subjective, (in contrast to inter-subjectivity) either of a person's attributes or general characteristics. Similarly, the word 'personal' is sometimes taken to mean individual's possessive qualities. These qualities define the humanity or *beingness* of a particular human being. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, the term “personal” means 'belonging or relating to a particular person', 'made or designed to be used by one person'. It also means 'of,

relating to, or affecting a particular person', 'relating to the person or body', 'relating to an individual or an individual's character, conduct, motives, or private affairs'. In the whole, it is what constitutes a person's property; either private or personal.

The term, “identity” on the other hand, has French and Latin origins. In French, it is *identité* and in Latin, *identitas* and equivalent to the Latin *identidem* (“sameness”), which resulted from combining *idem* (“same”) with *-ti-* (?) - yielding *identi-* - and *-tas* (suffix equivalent to the English “-ty”), this term denotes the relation each thing bears just to itself. Both literally mean 'same and same', i.e., “is the relation each thing bears only to itself.” Logically, going by this definition, *p* is *p*, *q* is *q*, *r* is *r*, no more, no less. That is, we cannot say *p* is *p* at one time and at another time *p* is not-*p* or that *p* is something else. Metaphysically, the term identity refers to the specific, unique or peculiar nature of a thing or its essence that distinguishes one thing from another, i.e., it refers to the idea of selfhood based on the uniqueness and individuality which makes a person distinct from others. It is the defining qualities of a thing. According to *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, it means 'sameness in all that constitutes the objective reality of a thing' or 'the distinguishing character or personality of an individual' or 'the condition of being the same with something described or asserted'. According to Shoemaker, “in its primary meaning, the noun 'identity' refers to the relation each thing has to itself and to no other thing. In the language of the logicians, this relation is transitive (if A is identical to B and B is identical to C, then A is identical to C), symmetrical (if A is identical to B, B is identical to A), and reflexive (everything is identical to itself).

In psychology, identity refers to the qualities, beliefs, personality, looks and/or expressions that make a person (self-identity) or group. Following from this, Weinreich defines identity thus: “A person's identity is defined as the totality of one's self-construal, in which how one construes oneself in the present expresses the continuity between how one construes oneself as one was in the past and how one construes oneself as one aspires to be in the future.” In similar vein, Leary & Tangney declares that: “identity refers to the capacity for self-reflection and the awareness of self.”

More so, the meaning of identity has been clearly explicated in John Locke's *magnus opus*; *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, in Four Books, Chapter XXVII, “Of Identity and Diversity”, stated thus:

Another occasion the mind often takes of comparing, is the very being of things, when, considering anything as existing at any determined time and place, we compare it with itself existing at another time, and thereon form the ideas of identity and diversity. When we see anything to be in any place in any instant of time, we are sure (be it what it will) that it is that very thing, and not another which at that same time exists in another place, how like and undistinguishable so ever it may be in all other respects: and in this consists IDENTITY, when the ideas it is attributed to vary not at all from what they were that moment wherein we consider their former existence, and to which we compare the present.

Connotatively, two things come out succinctly from the above quotation. 1. Identity is formed by the mind comparing things at any determined time and place. 2. In all respects; the things being compared must be alike and undistinguishable from each other, i.e., in *stricto sensus*, identity is when a thing varies not or remains the same (in all respects) when we compare its

former existence with the present. As a slight departure from the above definition, Slagel Jamie's definition is quite instructive: I take identity to refer to personal identity as opposed to the importance of identity of objects. Therefore, by "our identity", I am referring to our mental selves as opposed to our physical bodies or brains." He went on to clarify the sense with which he used the term asserting that: "identity is meant not in the sense of characteristics, but in the sense of the essential quality that makes me "me". When someone points to a school photo and says "that's me", what about the "photo me" has been maintained such that "current me" is the same as that past "me". The something which links a present object to a past or future object is identity.

Though a conceptualization of the term identity has been provided above, there remains a fundamental problem. The notion of identity gives rise to many philosophical problems—identity of indiscernibles and personal identity. The identity of indiscernibles is an ontological principle that states that there cannot be separate objects or entities that have all their properties in common. That is, entities x and y are identical if every predicate possessed by x is also possessed by y and vice versa; to suppose two things indiscernible is to suppose the same thing under two names. While personal identity relates to personal identity over time—what has to be the case for a person x at one time and a person y at a later time to be one and the same person?

It is instructive to point out that the philosophical concept of identity is distinct from the notion of the term as use in psychology and the social sciences. The philosophical concept concerns a relation, specifically, a relation that x and y stand in if, and only if they are one and the same thing, or identical to each other (i.e. if, and only if x is equal to y). On the other hand, sociological notion of identity has to do with a person's self-conception, social presentation, and more generally, the aspects of a person that make them unique, or qualitatively different from others (e.g. cultural identity, gender identity, national identity, online identity and processes of identity formation).

The Metaphysics and Paradox of identity

The term identity has been largely discussed or approached in metaphysics, being one of the branches of philosophy, such that we talk of metaphysics of identity. It is in this regard that metaphysicians, and sometimes philosophers of language and mind often raise or ask the following questions—what does it mean for an object to be the same as itself? If x and y are identical (are they the same thing), must they always be identical? Are they necessarily identical? What does it mean for an object to be the same, if it changes over time? If an object's parts are entirely replaced over time, as in the Ship of Theseus example, in what way is it the same? Let us use the last question to illustrate the relevance of the paradoxical nature of the metaphysics of identity. The ship of Theseus— or Theseus's paradox, in the metaphysics of identity is a thought experiment that raises the question of whether a ship that has had all of its parts or components replaced remains fundamentally the same object. The thought experiment is presented thus:

First, suppose that the famous ship sailed by the hero Theseus in a great battle has been kept in a harbor as a museum piece. As the years go by some of the wooden parts begin to rot and are replaced by new ones. After a century or so, all of the parts have been replaced. Is the "restored" ship the same object as the original?

Second, suppose that each of the removed pieces were stored in a warehouse, and after the century, technology develops to cure their

rotting and enable them to be put back together to make a ship. Is this “reconstructed” ship the original ship? And if so, is the restored ship in the harbor still the original ship too?

To address the difficulty or paradox in the thought experiment presented above, the term identity has been explicated in sundry ways to mean different things. The first proposed solution is to deny the idea of identity over time, that is, to say that there is no identity over time. It states that: “two ships, while identical in all other ways, are not identical if they exist at two different times. Each ship-at-time is a unique “event”. So even without replacement of parts, the ships in the harbour are different at each time.”

Heraclitus was the first Greek philosopher to introduce this solution when he propounded the doctrine that everything is in a state of flux and particularly the emphasis by his disciple, as described in Plato's *Theaetetus*, 'You cannot step twice into the same river, for fresh waters are ever flowing in upon you.' Similarly, Arius Didymus quoted him as saying “upon those who step into the same rivers, different and again different waters flow.” Technically speaking, it means nothing can be the same over time, since everything changes ceaselessly. It was in this sense Heraclitus denies the idea of identity over time. However, Heraclitus' claim about stepping twice into the same river has been disputed. Plutarch disputed it insisting that it cannot be done because “it scatters and again comes together, and approaches and recedes.”

The second attempt to resolve the thought experiment is the view that continual identity over time is via final cause. Aristotle in his philosophical system furnished us with four ideas of causes. He wrote that “we do not have knowledge of a thing until we have grasped its why, that is to say, its cause.” He held that his four “causes” provided an analytical scheme of general applicability. The word “cause” is also regarded as *hyle*. These are formal cause, material cause, final cause and efficient cause. By analyzing these causes, we may arrive at solving the paradox. The formal cause or 'form' of a thing is the design of a thing. In other words, it is the shape or pattern of a thing. The material cause is the stuff which a thing is made, that is the raw material out of which an object is composed. The final cause is the end of or the intended purpose of a thing. It is also defined “as that for the sake of which a thing is done.” The ship of Theseus would have the same ends, those being, mystically, transporting Theseus, and politically, convincing the Athenians that Theseus was once a living person, though its material cause would change with time. The efficient cause is how and by whom a thing is made. It is the designer or maker of a thing. Thus in the case of the ship of Theseus, the workers who built the ship in the first place could have used the same tools and techniques to replace the planks in the ship.

Aristotle therefore uses the idea of formal cause—by which he means the “what-it-is” of a thing to resolve the paradox. He illustrated it thus: “so the ship of Theseus is the 'same' ship, because the formal cause, or design, does not change, even though the matter (material) used to construct it may vary with time. In the same manner, for Heraclitus's paradox, a river has the same formal cause, although the material cause (the particular water in it) changes with time, and likewise for the person who steps in the river. This Aristotle's position has been attacked by indirect proof. Using arguments such as “suppose two ships are built using the same design and exist at the same time until one sinks the other in battle. Clearly the two ships are not the same ship even before, let alone after, one sinks the other, and yet the two have the same formal cause; therefore, formal cause cannot by itself suffice to determine an object's identity” or “[...] therefore, two objects' or object-instances' having the same formal cause does not by itself suffice to make them the same object or prove that they are the same object.”

Another attempt at resolving the paradox is to see it as 'one ship in two locations'. The argument is rendered thus: "in this theory, both the reconstructed and restored ships claim identity with the original, as they can both trace their histories back to it. As such they are both identical with the original. As identity is a transitive relation, the two ships are therefore also identical with each other, and a single ship existing in two locations at the same time." This may however negate one of the laws of thought, particularly the law of contradiction or non-contradiction. A thing cannot exist at two different places at the same time. But the idea is that both ships though existing in two different locations at the same time, they are traceable to the original. This is the sense at which the solution may be allowed.

Furthermore, another attempt at solving the paradox is to perceive the 'two ships with non-transitive identity'. The argument is rendered thus: "in this theory, the reconstructed and restored ships are considered to be separate objects, both are identical to the original, but they are not identical to each other. This requires us to drop the transitivity of identity, i.e. deny that "A=B" and "A=C" entails "B=C." In a different vein, the law of identity which originated from classical antiquity, from the formulation of Gottfried Leibniz holds that x is the same as y if and only if every predicate true of x is true of y as well. Hence, what are those things or elements that can make a thing to remain the same, steady and consistent throughout time in order for it to retain its identity that makes it that thing in relation to everything else?

In all, identity proper or strict identity is numerical identity, typically distinguished from exact similarity, which is qualitative identity, whereby two or more exactly similar objects are copies of each other, yet are more than one; hence, not identical. The notion or idea of numerical identity is also different from *haecceity*, from the Latin *haecceitas*, "thisness" or "Specificity," which means either the fundamental actuality of an existent entity, or an individual essence, i.e. a feature an object has necessarily, or without which it would cease to exist. This leads us to consider two types of identity— qualitative identity and numerical identity.

Qualitative Identity

This is a type of identity that is different from numerical identity. Things with qualitative identity share properties, so things can be more or less qualitatively identical. This means two things that are exactly similar. Qualitatively, a thing or person may change over time. These changes may be seen in size, shape, appearance etc. Things that are qualitatively identical share their qualitative properties with each other, but they are separate objects nevertheless. It has been argued that "this way of looking at identity is not "guaranteed" in the same way that numerical identity is. Numerically you are always one regardless of what changes internally." Going by this meaning, we can say that Boerbel and Rottweiler are qualitatively identical because they share the same property of being a dog. Two things are qualitatively identical when they are exactly similar. In this sense, identical twins may be qualitatively identical—there may be no telling them apart—but not numerically identical, as there are two of them: that's what makes them twins. G. E. Flood defines qualitative identity as being of the same origin, for example, two identical copies of your original birth certificate, or two red crayons of the same origin. Similarly, this refers to items that are identical in definite or certain descriptive aspects.

Numerical Identity

This identity requires absolute, or total, qualitative identity, and can only hold between a thing and itself. It is strictly being one and the same thing. Its name implies that it is the only identity relation in accordance with which we can properly count (or number) things: x and y are to be

properly counted as one just in case they are numerically identical. It can be characterized as the relation everything has to itself and to nothing else. Usually it is defined as the equivalence relation (or: the reflexive relation) satisfying Leibniz's law, the principle of the indiscernibility of identical, that if x is identical with y then everything true of x is true of y . The explanation provided by Vishal V. Shekhar about the differences between qualitative identity and numerical identity is apt:

The question is about numerical identity. To say that this and that are numerically identical is to say that they are one and the same: one thing rather than two. This is different from qualitative identity. Things are qualitatively identical when they are exactly similar. Identical twins may be qualitatively identical—there may be no telling them apart—but not numerically identical, as there are two of them: that's what makes them twins. A past or future person need not be, at that past or future time, exactly like you are now in order to be you—that is, in order to be numerically identical with you. You don't remain qualitatively the same throughout your life. You change: you get bigger or smaller; you learn new things and forget others; and so on. So the question is not what it takes for a past or future being to be you, as opposed to someone or something other than you.

Numerical identity means one thing rather than two, that is, one and the same. In this sense “a past/future person does not have to be exactly the same as you are now (in terms of action, thought, opinion etc) to be numerically identical with you, however at the same time, someone who is exactly similar to you may not be numerically identical to you.” Thus, “as long as I continue to exist at all I necessarily remain numerically the same.” Based on this idea of numerical identity, nothing can become something different than what it already is. One thing cannot become two separate things it is just the “logic of identity.”

It should be noted that the issue of personal identity is not about qualitative identity but numerical identity. In personal identity debate we are not asking questions about two similar things or entities and how they are alike, rather it is a question of how a thing at one time is the same thing at another time. To recast the point in another way, what does the person I am necessarily consist of from one day to the next? What would make me as a married man now the same as the bachelor who existed ten years ago? These questions concern numerical identity and not qualitative identity. Hence, personal identity is at the heart of numerical identity. It explicates the meaning of identity thus: “Necessarily, for any x , if x is a person at t and something y exists at t^* , $x=y$ if and only if x at t and y at t^* stand in relation R , where R is the relation preferred by the particular theory.”

The point being made here is that this definition of personal identity provides a criterion of numerical identity of persons. It states under what condition(s) a person identified at one time is the same entity as a person identified at another time, as well as implies answers to the questions of when persons begin to exist, what changes they can persist, and when they cease to exist. It is important to clarify this. Having sufficiently explicated and conceptualized the meaning of the term identity, it is apt to ask what personal identity is?

Simply put, personal identity intuitively entails the absence of change or variation relating to a particular person, such that the person's character, traits, desires, feelings, thoughts or personality remains the same from time to time. This means a person at time t_i remains and is

the same person at time t_2 in as much as both possess same consciousness and one is annexed to the other. This is the psychological approach view. The *physicalism* view takes personal identity as our identity through time consisting in the identity of our bodies. By and large, the attempt to explicate or comprehend personal identity in relation to time is referred to as the persistence question—the relevant questions include: is it possible to remain always the same person? What changes? What does stay the same mean? In what way do you relate to yourself now that makes you, you?

As an important aspect of the personal identity debate, the persistent question is roughly: what is necessary and sufficient for a past or future being to be someone existing now, and then describe someone or something existing at another time? Then we can ask whether we are referring twice to one thing, or once to each of two things. This persistent question is critical for the following reasons:

What does it takes for a person to persist from one time to another—to continue existing rather than cease to exist? What sorts of adventures is it possible in the broadest sense of the word 'possible', for you to survive, and what sort of event would necessarily bring your existence to an end? What determines which past or future being is you? Suppose you point to a child in an old class photograph and say, “that's me.” What makes you that one, rather than one of the others? What is it about the way she relates then to you as you are now that makes her you? For that matter, what makes it the case that anyone at all who existed back then is you? This is sometime called the question of personal identity over time. An answer to it is an account of our persistence conditions.

Whether humans will persist or not depends on or arises out of the hope that we might continue to exist when we die. Many world religions, particularly Christianity and Islam as well as many theological-cum-philosophical theories share this sentiment. According to them, biological death is not the termination of life or human's existence. Life actually continues after death. Then it raises the question, suppose I survive death, how would the person in this world or the next (that survives death) really resemble me? How would both of us relate to me as me now in order to be me, rather than someone else?

Furthermore, it raises the question, what does it take for a past or future being to be me? Do people have the same persistence condition? Take, for example, if what it takes for us to persist might depend on whether we are biological organisms or thinking beings, this would be different if we are referring to immaterial people such as gods or angels, as what it takes for them to persist might be different from what it takes for a human person to persist. Suppose the person that will eventually survive death will be immaterial or incorporeal being (soul or spirit) how will it be me now in this world that is material or embodied being? This takes us to the persistence question

Personal Identity and Locke's Consciousness Criterion

There are many theories of personal identity. There is the soul theory. According to this view, sameness of soul other than the body is the basis of a person's identity. This is seen in Plato's and Pythagoras' philosophies— where the soul is regarded as essentially the feature of the human person, capable of persisting, naturally immortal, indivisible and individualistic. The metaphysical essence of the soul is such that it is capable of surviving death unlike the human

body. For Aristotle, the soul perishes at bodily death and this contradicted Plato's position. The bodily on the other hand emphasize the continuity and functionality of the organs and other live sustaining aspects of the human body as constituting a person's identity.

Locke looks beyond the souls and the body views and placed identity on consciousness alone. As Locke remarks, "this may shew us wherein personal identity consists; not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of consciousness..." similarly, Locke affirms that "nothing but consciousness can unite remote existences into the same person, the identity of substance will not do it. For whatever substance there is, however framed, without consciousness there is no person..."

Locke was skeptical about the souls or body view of personal identity though he recognized both as substances which consciousness may inheres. Locke argued that souls, being simple and immaterial substances are not part of the natural world. Whatever exists or obtains, but not part of the natural world, is inherently mysterious. He went further, since other peoples' souls cannot be observed either directly or indirectly and since only activities, and not the substance, of the soul are open to empirical investigation, there is no way to detect by observing an individual whether his soul remains the same. Hence, on the soul view, personal identity is inherently mysterious.

Not fully convinced about the souls view and body view of personal identity, especially as moral responsibility and compensation cannot be plausibly attributed to the souls and body, Locke ostensibly embraced consciousness as the determination of a person's identity over time. By implication, it means that two entities A and B; once they are psychologically continuous then they are identical. In other words, if A carries within itself the consciousness of B and B carries within itself the consciousness of A, then they are both identical. However, he should be noted that Locke's consciousness criterion is reflexive. What will make a university professor the same boy who attended nursery reception one, forty years ago is if and only if the university professor is able to extend his memories or remembers his childhood experiences as that boy who attended nursery reception one forty years ago, otherwise, if he is unable though the same substance (body) therefore, he is a different person.

This last part has however elicited serious criticisms against Locke. First, Hume, as a radical empiricist, denied the reality and the existence of the self, arguing that there is no impression from which the idea of the self can be perceived. Second, Joseph Butler calls Locke's theory a 'wonderful mistake' because the very idea of consciousness presupposes personal identity and that Locke's argument is a circular argument. Third, Thomas Reid considered Locke's consciousness criterion as absurd on the grounds that it is possible for me to remember not all of my childhood experiences. If it is the case that as a university professor now, I remember some of my childhood experiences and I also forget some, it therefore means at one point, I am the same person and at another I am a different person thus leading to the multiplication of my selves. This is absurd.

Conclusion

The issue of a person's reidentification of its self harps on the question; what persists and what remains unchanged with time as I exist? Though some philosophers like Derek Parfit, have tried to draw our attention away from the fact that what matters in personal identity question is not identity per say but survival. What change can I survive as a person over time to remain the same person? Others, like David Shoemaker, have shifted attention to our practical concerns such as moral responsibility, compensation and self concern. More so, it is also important to emphasize not only the intrinsic approach in the personal identity debate but also the extrinsic approach. Though Locke's consciousness approach is metaphysically intuitive, the other as well as the environment also play significant role in the determination of a person's identity over time. In all of these, Locke's theory has proven to be consistent with the idea of reincarnation, Christian resurrection and the consideration of humans as forensic agents. It appears, it is only in consciousness that reward, compensation and moral responsibility can adequately find meaning in the discussion of personal identity.

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