

A SKEPTICAL VIEW ON LOCKE'S THEORY OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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Abstract. Locke's theory of personal identity has long been held to be the memory theory, or what is called the standard interpretation, i.e., a person a at t1 is identical to a person b at t2 if and only if a at t1 remembers any of b's actions or thoughts at t2. Many commentators agree at least half of the standard interpretation. However, the standard interpretation faces the "Memory Dilemma", according to which, if memory is pseudo memory, Locke's theory of personal identity faces several counterexamples; if memory is genuine memory, Locke's theory of personal identity is either inconsistent or circular. In response to the dilemma, commentators provide at least three approaches: (1) to argue that our intuition in those counterexamples is illusory; (2) to argue that there is an interpretation of genuine memory that does not make Locke's theory of personal identity circular or inconsistent; (3) to argue that there is a new understanding of consciousness, which is not memory, that explains away the "Memory Dilemma". I first defend the standard interpretation of Locke's theory of personal identity, and then argue that the three approaches that try to resolve the dilemma fail.

Keywords: person, personal identity, consciousness, memory

As is well known, Locke explains personal identity in terms of the sameness of consciousness. Locke affirms that "Different substances, by the same consciousness (where they do partake in it)," are "united into one Person" (II.xxvii.10:336).¹ And he says: "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*" (II.xxvii.10:336). And he says: "For the same consciousness being preserv'd, whether in the same or different Substances, the personal Identity is preserv'd" (II.xxvii.13:338). And he says: "This may shew us wherein *personal Identity* consists, not in the Identity of Substance, but, as I have said, in the Identity of *consciousness*" (II.xxvii.19:342). But it is unclear, and is a matter of debate, what Locke means by "the sameness of consciousness".

The standard or traditional interpretation of Locke's view on personal identity is the memory theory of personal identity, i.e., a person P at t1 is the same person at t2 if and only if P at t2 remembers any action or thought he or she had at t1. However,

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Lockean scholars have different views about the role of memory in Locke's theory of personal identity. For example, Butler², Grice³, Flew⁴, Reid⁵, Mackie⁶, Perry⁷, Allison⁸, Parfit⁹, Jolly¹⁰, Garret¹¹, Lowe¹², Ichinose¹³ and others argue, in conformity with the traditional interpretation, that memory is both necessary and sufficient for Lockean personal identity. Winkler¹⁴, Weinberg 2011¹⁵, Weinberg 2012¹⁶, Yaffe¹⁷ and others argue that memory is necessary but not sufficient for Lockean personal identity. Helm¹⁸, Gustafsson¹⁹, Rickless²⁰ and others argue that memory is sufficient but not necessary for Lockean personal identity. Behan²¹, MacCann²², Noonan²³, Forstrom²⁴, Strawson 2011²⁵, Strawson 2015²⁶, Boeker²⁷ and others argue that memory is neither necessary nor sufficient for Lockean personal identity.

In the first section of my paper, I will explain what Locke's theory of personal identity is and defend the standard interpretation of Locke's theory of personal identity. I will then turn, in section 2, to one of the main problems of Locke's theory of personal identity, i.e., the so called "Memory Dilemma."²⁸ In the third section, I will examine three ways-out of the Memory Dilemma and argue that all three approaches fail in certain ways. I, thus, conclude that we should remain skeptical about Locke's theory of personal identity.

1. Locke's Theory of Personal Identity

In chapter XXVII of *Essay*, Locke addresses "Identity and Diversity".²⁹ In the beginning of the chapter, he says: "considering anything as existing at any determin'd time and place, we compare it with it self existing at another time, and thereon form the *Ideas of Identity and Diversity*" (II.xxvii.1:328). Thus, what underpins the concept of identity and diversity is the ability to compare a thing which occupies space s1 at time t1 with a thing that occupies s2 at t2. It is diachronic identity that Locke is concerned about here.³⁰

What is the criterion for identity, i.e., what does it mean for a thing which occupies s1 at t1 to be identical with a thing that occupies s2 at t2? Locke argues that there are several principles that, taken together, determines the identity of things:³¹ (1) the exclusion principle: it is impossible for two things of the same kind to exist in the same place at the same time; (2) the single place principle: it is impossible for one thing to exist in different places at the same time; (3) the single origin principle: one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence.

The exclusion principle, the single origin principle and the single place principle are Locke's three principles of individuation, and they form Locke's general theory of identity, and of diversity. However, it is arguable whether these principles are justified. Christopher Hughes Conn³² correctly points out that the exclusion principle is unjustified because two mental substances can be located in the same place at the same time. Further, as he argues, it seems that the reductio argument that Locke offers for the exclusion principle presupposes the converse of the exclusion principle and, thus, is unpersuasive. The single place principle is plausible only if it is applied to non-scattered objects. For scattered objects are (scattered) in different places at the same time. The single origin principle, as C. D. Broad³³ argues, also seems to face difficulties. It seems both difficult and unnecessary to trace an object back to its origin in order to know whether an object a at t1 is identical with an object b at t2. In

response to these objections, we may interpret Locke's principles of individuation as follows: (1') the exclusion principle: it is impossible for two physical substances to exist in the same place at the same time; (2') the single place principle: it is impossible for a non-scattered object to exist in different places at the same time; (3') the single origin principle: one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence; and the single origin principle is a sufficient but not necessary condition to know whether an object a at t1 is identical with an object b at t2. Even so, Locke's principles of individuation seem to be inconsistent with his relative identity thesis if, indeed, he is committed to the relative identity thesis. For the single origin principle says that one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence but if the relative identity thesis is correct, one oak tree can have two beginnings of existence, the beginning of an oak tree and the beginning of the mass of matter.³⁴

Locke's general theory of identity is applicable to particular things. To find out what the identity of person consists in, however, the first thing Locke does is to consider what a person is. As he says:

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 it self as it self, 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. (II.xxvii.9:335)

Here Locke seems to maintain a metaphysical conception of person, according to which, person is "a thinking intelligent Being," a "thinking thing" to which reason and reflection apply. But Locke is ambiguous about whether this "thinking thing" is a substance or not.³⁵ The metaphysical conception of person is not the only definition that Locke gives for person. Later, in the same chapter, he also suggests that "Person... is a Forensic Term appropriating Actions and their Merits; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery" (II. xxvii. 26:346). Some commentators³⁶ argue that Locke's conception of person at its core is the Forensic Term, i.e., the conception of the subject of accountability. However, I do not find text evidence supporting this view. Nowhere does Locke say that the moral conception of person is prior to the metaphysical conception of person. Rather, to determine whether a person is accountable for a certain action, Locke says, one has to appeal to his consciousness. For example, Locke says: "in the great Day, wherein the Secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open, it may be reasonable to think, no one shall be made to answer for what he knows nothing of; but shall receive his Doom, his Conscience accusing or excusing him" (II. xxvii. 22:344). And he says:

At the Great Day, when every one shall *receive according to his doings, the secrets of all Hearts shall be laid open*. The Sentence shall be justified by the consciousness all Persons shall have, that they *themselves* in what Bodies soever they appear, or what Substances soever in what Bodies

soever they appear, or what Substances soever that consciousness adheres to, are the *same*, that committed those Actions, and deserve that Punishment for them. (II. xxvii. 26:347)

So far, it is established that Locke thinks that person is a thinking thing that consciousness is essential to, and that this conception of person is the basis of Locke's theory of moral accountability. But what is consciousness? Locke says that consciousness is "perceiving [that] one does perceive" (II. xxvii. 9:335). Since consciousness always represents a perception as perceived by *oneself*, it plays a crucial role in Locke's theory of personal identity, as Locke says: "since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and 'tis that, that makes everyone to be, what he calls *self*; and thereby consists *personal Identity*, i.e., the sameness of a rational Being" (ibid.). But what defines the identity of a person? Locke continues: "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 'tis by the same *self* with this present one that now reflects on it, that that Action was done" (ibid.). Here Locke seems to think that consciousness of the past, or a kind of memory, is the sameness of Consciousness. He also makes the same point when he says:

I answer, that cannot be resolv'd, but by those, who know what kind of Substances they are, that do think; and whether the consciousness of past Actions can be transferr'd from one thinking Substance to another. I grant, were the same Consciousness the same individual Action, it could not; But it being but a present representation of a past Action, why it may not be possible, that that may be represented to the Mind to have been, which really never was, will remain to be shewn. (II. xxvii. 13:337)

In the above passage, Locke explicitly says that the consciousness of the past, or "a present representation of a past action" can be transferred from one thinking substance to another, and, therefore, he detaches himself from Descartes' theory of personal identity by rejecting the sameness of immaterial substances as the criterion for personal identity.

But Locke is ambiguous about whether the consciousness of the past that defines the identity of a person is actual memory or genuine memory. Sometimes, he seems to suggest that one must *now* remembers what he did in the past if he is to be the same person as the one in the past, as he says:

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 concern'd, and as justly accountable for any Action was done a thousand Years since, appropriated to me now by this self-consciousness, as I am, for what I did the last moment. (II. xxvii. 17:341)

But sometimes, he suggests that one can remember what he did in the past if and only if he is to be the same person as the one in the past, as he says: “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*” (II. xxvii. 10:336). This point is even more clear when he says:

’tis evident, that immaterial thinking thing may sometimes part with its past consciousness, and be restored to it again, as appears in the forgetfulness Men often have of their past Actions, and the Mind many times recovers the memory of a past consciousness, which it had lost for twenty Years together. (II. xxvii. 23:344-5)

Now it is established that Locke thinks that the consciousness of the past, i.e., a sort of memory, actual or genuine memory, defines the identity of a person. We, then, turn to the difficulties of Locke’s definition of personal identity that he talks about. Locke seems to think that a total loss of memory raises difficulty for his definition of personal identity. He says:

But yet possibly it will still be objected, suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my Life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same Person, that did those Actions, had those Thoughts, that I was once conscious of, though I have now forgot them? To which I answer, that we must here take notice what the Word *I* is applied to, which in this case is the Man only. (II.xxvii.20:342)

In the above passage, Locke makes an important distinction between Person and Man. This makes his theory of personal identity different from Hobbes’s materialistic conception. He explicitly says that a total loss of memory raises difficulty for his definition of personal identity, which confirms our interpretation of Locke’s theory of personal identity. If a total loss of memory raises questions for Locke’s definition of personal identity, a sort of memory is the necessary condition for one’s personal identity. Let me explain why. The problem that a total loss of memory raises is as follows:

- (1) A person a at t1 is (or seems to be) the same person as b at t2;
- (2) And a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 only if b at t2 remembers (or would remember) any of a’s actions or thoughts at t1;
- (3) However, a person b at t2 wholly loses the memory of any of a’s actions or thoughts at t1;
- (4) Therefore, a person a at t1 is not the same person as b at t2.
- (5) Therefore, contradiction.

If Locke does not hold Premise (2), i.e., a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 only if b at t2 remembers (or would remember) any of a’s experiences or thoughts at

t1, the total loss of memory case would not be an objection to his definition of personal identity as he acknowledges. Therefore, it is apparent that Locke thinks that a sort of memory is necessary for personal identity. This reading is further supported by his theory of moral accountability, as he says: “whatever past Actions it cannot reconcile or appropriate to that present self by consciousness, it can be no more concerned in, than if they had never been done” (II. xxvii. 26:346). This quote also further supports my interpretation of Locke’s conception of person because his conception of concernment is based on his conception of consciousness.

Another difficulty, or in Locke’s own terms, “a fatal Error,” that he raises for his definition of personal identity, is the paramnesia case. He says:

But that which we call the *same consciousness*, not being the same individual Act, why one intellectual Substance may not have represented to it, as done by itself, what it never did, and was perhaps done by some other Agent, why I say such a representation may not possibly be without reality of Matter of Fact, as well as several representations in Dreams are, which yet, whilst dreaming, we take for true, will be difficult to conclude from the Nature of things. (II.xxvii.13:338)

Here Locke argues that one’s personal identity is preserved as the same consciousness transfers from one substance to another, as he says: “For the same consciousness being preserv’d, whether in the same or different Substances, the personal Identity is preserv’d” (ibid.). But he apparently thinks this is a difficulty, and in fact, “a fatal Error,” of his definition of personal identity because he has to appeal to the goodness of God to solve this difficulty. If the paramnesia case does raise a difficulty for Locke’s definition, a sort of memory is sufficient for personal identity. Let me explain why. The problem it raises is as follows:

- (a) A person a at t1 is (or seems to be) a different person from b at t2;
- (b) And, a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if b at t2 remembers any of a’s actions or thoughts at t1;
- (c) Therefore, it follows from (b) that person a at t1 is not the same person as b at t2 only if b at t2 does not remember any of a’s actions or thoughts at t1;
- (d) However, a person b at t2 remembers a’s actions or thoughts at t1;
- (e) Therefore, a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2.
- (f) Therefore, contradiction.

Locke resolves this difficulty, as we have discussed, by arguing that a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 but they are different substances, and, therefore, premise (a) should be revised to (a’): a thinking substance a at t1 is different from a thinking substance b at t2. Since there is no contradiction arises from combining Premises (a’) and (e), the difficulty is resolved. Thus, it is evident that Locke should hold Premise (b): a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if b at t2 remembers any of a’s experiences or thoughts at t1. A sort of memory is sufficient for one’s personal identity. This reading is further supported by Locke’s example of Nestor, in which he says: “But let him once find himself conscious of any of the Actions of

Nestor, he then finds the same Person with Nestor” (II. xxvii. 14:340). Locke apparently acknowledges the queerness of his theory, as he says: “I am apt enough to think I have in treating of this Subject made some Suppositions that will look strange to some Readers, and possibly they are so in themselves...we might see the Absurdity of some of those Suppositions I have made” (II. xxvii. 27:347).

Therefore, Locke clearly maintains that a sort of memory is the necessary and sufficient condition of personal identity. In particular, he uses the example of a total loss of memory to establish that (2) a person *a* at *t*₁ is the same person as *b* at *t*₂ only if *b* at *t*₂ remembers (or would remember) any of *a*’s actions or thoughts at *t*₁, and the paramnesia example (remembering what “it” never did) to establish that (b) a person *a* at *t*₁ is the same person as *b* at *t*₂ if *b* at *t*₂ remembers any of *a*’s actions or thoughts at *t*₁. Locke thus maintains a sort of memory theory of personal identity: (LPI) a person *a* at *t*₁ is the same person as *b* at *t*₂ if and only if *b* at *t*₂ remembers (now remembers or can remember) any of *a*’s actions or thoughts at *t*₁.

2. Locke’s Dilemma

There are several (further) examples that render LPI too counter-intuitive to be comprehensible.

First, one might argue that Locke is mistaken in holding that memory is a necessary condition for personal identity. In Reid’s example of the brave officer,³⁷ the elderly general can remember taking the enemy’s standard in battle when he was a young officer, and the young officer can remember being flogged for robbing an orchard as a boy, but the general cannot remember being flogged as a boy. Since the general cannot remember being flogged as a boy, on Locke’s view, he is not the boy. However, according to the principle of transitivity of identity, if *A*=*B*, *B*=*C*, then *A*=*C*, it follows that the general is the boy. Reid thus concludes that Locke is committed to a contradiction. The case of amnesia that we have discussed is similar to Reid’s brave officer case.

Second, one might argue that Locke is mistaken in holding that memory is a sufficient condition for personal identity. In the example of paramnesia,³⁸ discussed above, a person can remember or at least seemingly remember what another person experiences or thinks, but this person is not personally identical with the person whose experience he remembers. In the example of what Perry³⁹ argues is a kind of fission, suppose, in a brain rejuvenation, Jones’s brain was duplicated twice and put into Brown’s and Smith’s skulls; after the operation, Smith who was in room 104 and Brown who was in room 102 woke up and remembered the thoughts and deeds of Jones. Therefore, Jones is identical to Brown and Smith but Brown is not identical to Smith. In the example of what Perry argues is a kind of fusion, both Brown’s and Smith’s brains were put into Jones’s skull, and Jones has memory of both Brown’s and Smith’s deeds and thoughts; therefore, Jones is identical to Brown and Smith but again Brown and Smith are not identical to each other.⁴⁰

In response to these counter-examples, Locke seems to suggest, as we have discussed, that there is a distinction between genuine memory⁴¹ and pseudo memory, and this distinction will explain away all those counterexamples. LPI can be expressed in two ways:

LPI₁: a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if b at t2 seemingly remembers (or now remembers) any of a's actions or thoughts at t1.

LPI₂: a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if b at t2 genuinely remembers (or can remember) any of a's actions or thoughts at t1.

The examples above are only counterexamples to LPI₁, not to LPI₂. For example, in Reid's case of the brave officer, if the elderly general only seemingly does not remember being flogged as a boy but he genuinely remembers being flogged as a boy, the contradiction between the principle of transitivity and Locke's theory of personal identity would be resolved.

This approach seems plausible, but the problem is: what does it mean to "genuinely remember" or (as some have proposed) "could in principle remember"? Mackie argues:

But what can this "could in principle remember" mean? Surely only that those actions and experiences are his. If this suggestion is to avoid circularity, it must presuppose that there is some other criterion or constituent of personal identity; it tacitly abandons the Lockean theory in favor of some other view.⁴²

If Mackie is right, to understand remembering as genuine remembering would either lead to circularity or inconsistency with Locke's theory. Why would it lead to circularity? Joseph Butler says: "And one should really think it self-evident, that consciousness of personal identity presupposes, and therefore cannot constitute, personal identity; any more than knowledge, in any other case, can constitute truth, which it presupposes."⁴³ What would this passage mean? He might mean that it is circular to say that consciousness of personal identity constitutes personal identity, for it presupposes personal identity. If this is really Butler's charge, as Rickless⁴⁴ points out, it is off the target, for what constitutes personal identity for Locke is not consciousness of personal identity, but consciousness of a person's action and thoughts. But Butler's charge might be this: as pointed out by Lowe⁴⁵, "it is a precondition of attributing to anyone a genuine memory of some past experience that the person to whom one is attributing of some past experience was indeed the person who had the experience." If this is Butler's charge, as Mackie points out, there is no way out of this charge unless Locke's definition of personal identity presupposes some other criterion or constituent of personal identity, such as bodily continuity or the sameness of immaterial substance, which leads to inconsistency with Locke's theory of personal identity.

Therefore, it seems Locke cannot avoid the dilemma: either his theory of personal identity is counterintuitive if LPI is interpreted as LPI₁; or his theory is circular or inconsistent if LPI is interpreted as LPI₂.

3. Possible Ways-Out

There are several ways-out of the dilemma. The first approach in response to the Memory Dilemma is to argue that our intuition in those counterexamples is illusory. For example, Jolley⁴⁶ argues that since there is no way out of the dilemma through the second horn due to the vicious circularity, the best way out of it is just to bite the bullet and accept that personal identity is not transitive. If Jolly is right to

question the transitivity principle, Reid's brave officer example and the fission and fusion examples will not be as blatantly counterintuitive as they appear.

However, there seems to be a severe cost if we deny the transitivity principle. For example, in the brave officer's case, Garrett⁴⁷ argues, if the general is not identical to the boy, it is possible that two persons are located in the same place at the same time. The general took the enemy's standard when he was the young officer, and the boy will take the enemy's standard when he will be the young officer. If the general and the boy are not identical, two things of a kind (two persons) will be located in the same place (in the battle) at the same time (when the general and the boy are the young officer). Thus, since, as we have seen according to the exclusion principle, two things of a kind cannot be located in the same place at the same time, the general must be identical to the boy and the boy to the young officer, and the transitivity principle must stand after all to preserve to prevent the impossibility of violation of the exclusion principle. Similarly, the same point will also apply to the fission and fusion examples. Therefore, Jolley's proposal inevitably leads to Locke's inconsistency between LPI₁ and the exclusion principle.

Perhaps Locke's theory of personal identity can be interpreted so that the preservation of the transitivity principle, as well as the exclusion principle, does not raise problems for it. For example, John Perry⁴⁸ argues, if we understand personal identity as a life-time identity, and properly introduce temporal adverbs in statements about persons, the tension between Locke's theory and the transitivity principle will go away.

Perry argues that there is no contradiction between these claims in the fission case: (1) Brown-Jones is not the same person as Smith-Jones; (2) before the operation, Smith-Jones was Jones; (3) before the operation, Brown-Jones was Jones; (4) before the operation, Smith-Jones was Brown-Jones. He argues that (2) and (3) do not yield the conclusion, i.e., Brown-Jones is the same person as Smith-Jones; we can only infer from (2) and (3) to (4). If Perry is correct that personal identity can only be defined as either identity of person-stage or lifetime personal identity, it is also improper to say (1) Brown-Jones is not the same person as Smith-Jones. What is proper is to say (5) after the operation, Brown-Jones is not the same person as Smith-Jones. Since there is no contradiction between claim (5) and (2), (3), (4), the problem of fission is solved.

Perry's sketch of the person-stage language, however, involves a contradiction. McIntyre⁴⁹ correctly argues that Perry's theory question-beggingly presupposes a claim that is false according to the brain rejuvenation story. Perry states that (6) before the operation, Jones will be in room 102 after the operation is true, and we know that (2) before the operation, Smith-Jones was Jones. From (6) and (2), we infer that it is true that (7) before the operation, Smith-Jones will be in room 102 after the operation. However, (7) is false because according to the brain rejuvenation story, Smith-Jones is in room 104 after the operation. Thus, it seems that Perry's attempt to define personal identity in terms of person-stage fails. It is, therefore, still questionable whether the transitivity principle is compatible with Locke's theory of personal identity. If so, the attempt to mediate the contradiction between Locke's theory and the transitivity principle fails, and the Memory Dilemma remains.

One might suggest that there is an alternative interpretation of “genuinely remember” which avoids the issues of circularity and inconsistency that apparently generate the Memory Dilemma. For example, Mackie⁵⁰ mentions an “ancestral link” theory of personal identity proposed by Grice as an amendment to avoid the Memory Dilemma; Parfit develops this theory into the “chain of memory” theory; and Garrett argues that this “chain of memory” theory is not an amendment but Locke’s own view. If Locke’s theory of personal identity is interpreted this way, the transitivity principle will indeed be an advantage of Locke’s theory. According to the ancestral link theory⁵¹:

LPI₂: a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if there is an “ancestral link” that connects b’s memory at t2 and any of a’s actions and thoughts at t1.

If a person a at t1 and b at t2 and c at t3 all belong to the same of consciousness, the same unified mental history unified by the relevant ancestral links, then they are the same person. In particular, if c at t3 seemingly remembers any of b’s actions and thoughts at t2, and b at t2 seemingly remembers any of a’s actions and thoughts at t1, c is the same person as b, and b is the same person as a, and c is the same person as a (for c genuinely remembers any of a’s actions and thoughts at t1, though c might not seemingly remember it).

The ancestral link theory easily explains away Reid’s brave officer example; however, it is hard to see how the ancestral link theory explains away the amnesia example. For during the amnesia, the person has no consciousness at all, and thus nothing to be linked with its ancestor’s memory. But Parfit suggests how the amnesia example might be explained by the “chain of memory” theory, allowing us to say, that even on a Memory theory, that “a person continues to exist even if he suffers from complete amnesia.”⁵² For example, Parfit suggests that we suppose that I am knocked unconscious by a climbing accident. My fellow climber tells me years later what he shouted at me just before I fell. Years later I *seem to remember* what my fellow climber shouted at me. It seems impossible, however, for me to actually remember what he shouted since it is a well-established fact that we cannot remember our last few experiences before we are knocked unconscious.⁵³ Parfit proposes a way of dealing with this problem with the word “memory” in a sense wide enough that its continuity allows any cause. Thus, in the above example, even though my “memory” that my fellow climber yelled at me before I fell was caused by his testimony rather than my actual memory, I still “genuinely remember” that he yelled at me. This “chain of memory” theory is, thus, a very liberal version of a psychological criterion for personal identity: a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if (1) there is between them continuity of memory in the sense of “the holding of overlapping chains of strong connections,” where (2) this continuity can have any sort of cause, and so long as (3) “there does not exist a different person who is also psychologically continuous with b”.⁵⁴

However, Parfit’s “chain of memory” theory is still too narrow for a plausible theory of personal identity; for what if, in the above example, I do not even “seem to remember” what my fellow-climber shouted at me? Observers might be convinced by other evidence that I continued to exist when my fellow-climber shouted at me; but what if I do not remember what my fellow-climber shouted at me even in the widest sense of “memory”?

Garrett has further developed the “chain of memory” theory. Garrett⁵⁵ argues that “the extension by consciousness of a present person into the past” is not limited to what the person now remembers or can now remember; rather, to be conscious of a person’s experiences or thoughts is to “find” oneself to be the same person, to be prepared to represent any of this person’s experiences or thoughts as performed by oneself. Thus, even though in the above example I do not remember what my fellow-climber shouted at me, as long as I once remembered, or external evidence convinced me, I may well honestly represent what my fellow-climber shouted at me as heard by myself, even if with less force and conviction than is present in actual memory. And according to Garrett this type of “memory” is arguably allowed by Locke as constitutive of a “chain” that constitutes personal identity.

Garrett’s diagnosis of Locke’s theory of personal identity conflicts with the diagnosis of Grice, Mackie and Parfit. For example, Grice⁵⁶ says: “The theory which I am going to suggest is, I think, mainly a modification of Locke’s theory of Personal Identity.” And Mackie⁵⁷: “However, this is a revision, not an interpretation, of Locke’s account.” And Parfit⁵⁸: “Locke suggested that experience-memory provides the criterion for personal identity. Though this is not, on its own, a plausible view, I believe that it can be part of such a view.”

According to their interpretations, Locke indeed holds the view that a person *a* at *t*₁ is the same person as *b* at *t*₂ if and only if *b* at *t*₂ now remembers (or can now remember) any of *a*’s actions or thoughts at *t*₁. This is why they call their theory of personal identity, an amendment of Locke’s theory of personal identity. The textual evidence from Locke seems to support this view. Locke says:

Suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my Life, beyond a possibility of retrieving them, so that perhaps I shall never be conscious of them again; yet am I not the same Person, that did those Actions, had those Thoughts, that I was once conscious of, though I have now forgot them? (II.xxvii.20:342)

In response to the question, he answers: “we must here take notice what the Word *I* is applied to, which in this case is the Man only” (II.xxvii.20:342). Mackie interprets this passage in this way: “that is, the person who did those forgotten actions is not the same person as I now am, though no doubt a series of memory bridges will have connected them.” If Mackie is right, Locke would not hold the ancestral link theory or any form of the chain of memory theory. The “ancestral link” theory or the “chain of memory” theory might be a theory of identity of man, but not a theory of personal identity.

However, Garrett insists that Locke holds the “chain of memory” theory:

For to become conscious of an action of Nestor’s is, on Locke’s account, to become convinced that one is the *same self* as Nestor and *ipso facto* to become prepared to represent any of the actions of Nestor’s *self*—properly incorporated into Nestor’s self at whatever time and by whatever means—as actions performed by *one’s own self*, and this must include even actions that Nestor once remembered but that one cannot now specifically remember.⁵⁹

I think that it is hard to see why Locke would endorse the view that Garrett attributes to him. Though Locke claims: “as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought...it is the same *self* now it was then” (II.xxvii.9:335), he never asserts that the extension by consciousness of the present person to the past goes beyond what one now remembers or can now remember. Locke says: “But let him once find himself conscious of any of the Actions of *Nestor*, he then finds himself the same person as *Nestor*” (II.xxvii.14:340). This seems to support Garrett’s view that if a person once remembered any of the actions or thoughts of someone, he is that same person. But I think that the quoted passage actually supports the view that if a person b once at t2 remembered any of the actions or thoughts of a at t1, a at t1 is the same person as b *at t2*.⁶⁰ Note that this is quite different from the view Garrett attributes to Locke: if a person b once at t2 remembered any of the actions or thoughts of a at t1, a at t1 is the same person as b *at any time*. Earlier in the same passage, Locke raises the question: “But he, now having no consciousness of any of the Actions either of *Nestor* or *Thersites*, does, or can he, conceive himself the same person as either of them” (II.xxvii.14:339)? He responds:

So that this consciousness not reaching to any of the Actions of either of those Men, he is no more one *self* with either of them, than if the Soul or immaterial Spirit, that now informs him, had been created, and began to exist, when it began to inform his present Body. (II.xxvii.14:339)

Thus, it should be clear that Locke thinks that if one *now* has no consciousness of any of the actions of Nestor, he cannot conceive himself the same person as him. It thus follows that if a person b at t2 (say, now) is the same person as a (say, Nestor) at t1, b at t2 has consciousness of some of a’s actions or thoughts at t1. Garrett is thus wrong to say that Locke holds the “chain of memory” theory. And the second approach in response to the Memory Dilemma also fails.

Even though the first two approaches fail, there might be a third approach that explains away the dilemma. One might want to find a new understanding of Locke’s concept of consciousness to avoid the dilemma⁶¹:

LPI₃: a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if b at t2 is “conscious” of a’s experiences or thoughts at t1.

We might say that Garrett has already done this. However, I think that Garrett’s interpretation is better regarded as an alternative interpretation of “genuine remembering,” than as comparable to the suggested to be in this section. For he never says that consciousness (of the past) is not memory, and indeed his understanding of consciousness is as a type of “memory”.

Weinberg argues that the traditional interpretations of Locke’s theory have been taking consciousness as a state of a person providing a psychological criterion for personal identity, but textual evidence also seems to support the view that, as a certain enduring “thing” in its own right, consciousness provides a metaphysical criterion for personal identity. Weinberg⁶² says:

But Locke also seems to see consciousness as (2) the ongoing self we are aware of in these conscious states. The second sense is the objective fact of an ongoing consciousness, something that is epistemically available from a third personal (maybe only God's) point of view.

Thus, according to her interpretation "consciousness" has two senses for Locke: (1) consciousness as a psychological criterion for personal identity is a state of awareness of myself as thinking and acting (or willing); (2) consciousness as a metaphysical criterion for personal identity is the ongoing self I am aware of in such states of awareness. The former is epistemically accessible to us; the latter is (maybe) only epistemically accessible to God.

Since Locke's psychological interpretation of personal identity either ends up with counterexamples or with problems of circularity or inconsistency, the only way around this, Weinberg argues, is just to allow a metaphysical interpretation of Locke's theory of personal identity. If Locke's theory of personal identity can be interpreted in a metaphysical way, Weinberg argues, there will be an objective fact of the matter about the truth or falsity of what is given in the first-personal way, accessible from God's point of view. From the latter point of view, it would be truly known whether I am a self with a particular past (even if I do not remember my past).

Weinberg's interpretation of Lockean personal identity has two advantages compared to the standard view and the ancestral link or chain of memory theory. First, since she argues that memory is not sufficient for personal identity, she does not need to deal with the paramnesia, fission and fusion examples. Secondly, the metaphysical criterion for personal identity can compensate for the deficiencies of the psychological criterion for personal identity and explains away Reid's brave officer and amnesia examples.

However, apart from the fact that Weinberg's interpretation leaves Locke vulnerable to the inconsistency criticism,⁶³ Weinberg's interpretation itself is inconsistent with Locke's text. Weinberg says:

There are two ways, Locke suggests, that we can think about consciousness as having a continuing existence. We can try to explain it insofar as it can be seen to fit with the traditional ontology of substances, modes and relations, or we can try to explain it insofar as it continues to exist as the object I, self, or person we experience when we are conscious we are perceiving ideas.⁶⁴

But (as this even seems to grant) Weinberg's new understanding of consciousness cannot fit into the traditional ontology of substances, modes and relations. Is this "ongoing self" a substance? Since "this *self* has existed in a continued Duration more than one instant" (II.xxvii.25:345), it surely looks like a substance; but Locke continues to say: "In all which account of *self*, the same numerical Substance is not considered, as making the same *self*: but the same continued consciousness" (II.xxvii.25:346). Is this "ongoing self" not a substance, but something that looks like a substance? But how is it possible that something that is not a substance can have "reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing" (II.xxvii.9:335)? In any case, Weinberg does not make clear what this "ongoing self" is, and certainly not in a way that is consistent with Locke's text. Weinberg's approach, therefore, also fails to explain away the Memory Dilemma.

Yaffe provides an alternative reading of consciousness that supposedly also explains away the brave officer example and the amnesia example. According to Yaffe, consciousness is “both a smooth and halting awareness of one’s mental states”, and it always “involves two ideas, a halting idea of the mental states of the previous instant, and a smooth idea of a particular mental state enjoyed during that instant” which provides one with “a conception of oneself as continuously existing, as having duration”.⁶⁵ To illustrate this point, Yaffe invites us to imagine looking at a photograph of a streak of flying cannonball with a spotlight moving from left to right across the streak.⁶⁶ Putting the photograph (the halting idea) and the spotlight (the smooth idea) together, Yaffe argues, we are able to get the idea of succession. Once we have gotten the idea of succession, we are able to acquire the idea of continuous existence. Thus, even though one is not actually conscious during an instant, he still has the (fictitious) idea of continuous existence throughout a sequence of instants. Therefore, Yaffe concludes that the idea of continuous existence is applicable even across gaps in conscious experience, and then applying the point to Locke’s personal identity:

Perhaps person-stage A and C can be thought of as stages of the same person if there’s some other person-stage B such that the succession of ideas from A to B allows B to derive *the idea* of continuous existence while the succession from B to C allows C to do so.⁶⁷

Therefore, even though there is no succession of ideas from A to C, as long as there is a certain sort of succession of ideas from A to B and from B to C (a sort allowing for the derivation of the idea of succession), person-stage A and C can still be the stages of the same person. For example, in Reid’s brave officer example, even though there is no succession of ideas from the boy to the general, as long as there is the right sort of succession of ideas from the boy to the officer and from the officer to the general, the boy and the general can still be the same person. Similarly, a person might have continued existence during amnesia.

Note that Yaffe’s understanding of consciousness is different from Weinberg’s. Nowhere does Yaffe suggest that there is a metaphysical criterion for personal identity in Locke’s theory, or some sort of enduring object that is consciousness even though we may fail to be conscious of it. Like Weinberg, he aims to explore what more can be said about consciousness besides that it is a form of awareness and directed inward.⁶⁸ For him, however, the enduring “self” in question seems to be a “real object” *only* in the sense that it is really the object *of an idea*. In particular, he doesn’t seem to see Locke as thinking that such an “object” is something that, over and above *one’s own* present consciousness of it, might also be the object of *some other* (e.g. *God’s*) consciousness. But Yaffe, in any case, agrees that Locke speaks of an ongoing “self” or “mind” that we can represent as enduring through time up to the present, encompassing successive ideas, and even as having existed at times when the ideas it contained are not at present objects of recollection.

However, on the one hand, Yaffe’s “enduring self,” which is a sort of fictional construction,³ only provides a false continued existence that crosses gaps in conscious experience. The “enduring self” at most makes us believe that there is a succession of ideas from A to C; it cannot demonstrate objectively that there is indeed

a succession of ideas from A to C. Thus, Yaffe's interpretation at most explains why we believe that the boy is the general; it cannot explain why the boy is the general. On the other hand, the "enduring self" is not enough on which to base reward and punishment on the Day of Judgment. Locke says that person is "a Forensic Term, appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness, and Misery" (II.xxvii.26:346). But if the idea of continued existence is only a fictional construction, it might not be able to give us something "objective" enough to be the basis for a perception of objective desert, above and beyond the mere subjective fact that we seem to be able or unable to remember certain things at certain points in our lives. Therefore, Yaffe's approach also fails to explain away the Memory Dilemma.

Strawson⁶⁹ provides the other alternative interpretation of consciousness, i.e., consciousness as concerned consciousness, to explain away the Memory Dilemma. He argues that if we understand Person as a forensic term, Consciousness entails Concernment. If b at t2 is Concerned in a's actions and thoughts at t1, b at t2 is Conscious of a's actions and thoughts at t1. Also, if b at t2 is not Conscious of a's actions and thoughts at t1, b at t2 is not Concerned in a's actions and thoughts at t1. And it follows that a at t1 is not the same (forensic) Person as b at t2. In Reid's brave officer case, since the general is not Conscious of the boy's being flogged, the general is not Concerned in the boy's being flogged. It follows that the general is not the same (forensic) Person as the boy.

Now it seems that if the general is not the same Person as the boy, the general is the same Person as the young officer, and the young officer is the the same Person as the boy, Locke violates the principle of the transitivity of identity. But Strawson argues that this is not an objection to Locke, but an illustration of the point that human beings won't be responsible for all the things they have done in their lives, but only those they are still Conscious of or Concerned in on the Day of Judgment.⁷⁰ He argues:

As a subject of experience you have a life time of actions and experiences behind you – most of which you've completely forgotten. The ones that are part of your Personal identity, i.e., the ones that constitute your forensic identity, i.e., the ones that constitute the Person you are, considered as a moral being, a forensic entity, are simply those which you are still Conscious of, and hence still Concerned in: those that you still experience as your own in the crucial moral-affective way.⁷¹

If Strawson's interpretation is correct, Locke is simply insightful to point out that human beings are not always accountable for everything he did or thought. The so called "counterexamples" are not really counterexamples at all. But though I think that Strawson is right that Locke has a forensic notion of personal identity in mind, personal identity is not at its core a forensic term.⁷² Locke says: "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" (II.xxvii.9:335). Thus, there are at least two senses of personal identity, a forensic sense, and a metaphysical sense. Nowhere does Locke say that the forensic conception of person is prior to the metaphysical conception of person. And we can easily understand why Locke would not say so. If b at t2 is not conscious of any of a's actions or thoughts at t1, b is not

accountable for any of a's actions or thoughts at t1. Consciousness is, therefore, prior to accountability. The metaphysical conception of person is prior to the forensic conception of person. All in all, there is no textual evidence supporting the view that personal identity is at its core a forensic term. Strawson's interpretation also fails to explain away the Memory Dilemma.

4. A Skeptical Conclusion

To conclude, Locke's theory of personal identity is correctly interpreted by the traditional or standard view: (LPI) a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if b at t2 remembers any of a's actions or thoughts at t1. LPI can be interpreted in two ways: (LPI₁) a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if b at t2 seemingly remembers any of a's actions or thoughts at t1; and (LPI₂) a person a at t1 is the same person as b at t2 if and only if b at t2 genuinely remembers any of a's actions or thoughts at t1. But this standard view faces a dilemma: either Locke's theory of personal identity is counterintuitive, if LPI is interpreted as LPI₁; or his theory is circular or inconsistent, if LPI is interpreted as LPI₂. There seems to be three types of approaches by Lockean scholars to respond the Memory Dilemma: 1) one might argue that our intuitions in those counterexamples are illusory, because of the uncritical assumption that the principle of the transitivity of identity applies to the case of diachronic identity; or 2) one might grant the principle of transitivity in application to the case but argue that there is an interpretation of "genuinely remember" (LPI₂) through ancestral links or chains of memory that explains the distinction between the two kinds of memory without begging the question or being inconsistent; 3) one might suggest a third way out of the dilemma by arguing for a completely new understanding of the role of the idea of "same consciousness" (LPI₃) in Locke's theory of personal identity.

I have argued that these three approaches fail to explain away the Memory Dilemma that challenges Locke's account in the first place. The first approach fails to explain why the principle of transitivity is not applicable or compatible with Locke's theory of personal identity; the second approach is an amendment but is not an interpretation of Locke's theory of personal identity; the third approach indeed explains away the counterexamples in question, but Weinberg's approach leads to inconsistency with Locke's more general ontology, Yaffe's interpretation, which reduces the role of enduring consciousness in Locke's theory to the role of the *idea* of an enduring consciousness, seems incapable of fully explaining away the brave officer example and it is not 'objective' enough for the basis Locke requires for the distribution of reward and punishment to the 'same person' who deserves it on the Judgment Day, and Strawson's interpretation is based on the uncritical assumption that Locke's conception of person is at its core a forensic term.

Therefore, we still need to take a skeptical stance towards Locke's theory of personal identity on the grounds that the Memory Dilemma still seems to be a major objection to it.

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- ²⁸ Jolley, N., (1999), 120-1; Garrett, D., (2003), 17; Weinberg, S., (2011), 400-1.
- ²⁹ This chapter was added to the second edition of the *Essay* in response to William Molyneux's comments to the first edition.
- ³⁰ Some scholars argue that Locke is also concerned about synchronic identity when he talks about personal identity and since memory is consciousness of the past, it cannot explain synchronic personal identity. I think that Locke has made clear that he is only concerned about diachronic identity here.
- ³¹ Not all of the three principles are on the same level or independent. The first two principles are in the same breath, for Locke says: “for two things of the same kind, to be or exist in the same instant, in the very same place; or one and the same thing in different places” (II.xvii.1:328). The third principle follows from the second principle, for if an object can only exist in one place, it can only come into existence in one place. See Conn, C.H., *Locke On Essence and Identity*, (Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic Publisher, 2003), 68-9.
- ³² Conn, C. H., (2003), 65-68.
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- ³⁴ The inconsistency between Locke's principles of individuation and the relative identity thesis is pointed out by Conn, C. H., (2003), 91. Based on this reason, Conn argues that Locke does not hold the relative identity thesis. But if Locke does not hold the relative identity thesis, he seems to commit to essentialism which he explicitly rejects.
- ³⁵ See Rickless, S. C., (2014), 115, Lowe, E. J., (2005), and Noonan, H. W., (2000), 221.
- ³⁶ See Behan (1979), Strawson (2015) and Boeker (2014).
- ³⁷ Reid, T., (1975), 347.
- ³⁸ Flew, A., (1951), 57.
- ³⁹ Perry, J., (1972).
- ⁴⁰ One might argue that the examples of fission and fusion might be explained away by Locke's exclusion principle, i.e., two things of the same kind cannot locate at the same place at the same time. But as it is argued, two things of the same kind can locate at the same place at the same time at least when the things are thinking substances.
- ⁴¹ According to Flew, genuine remembering necessarily involves the truth of the proposition said to be remembered, and honest memory claims do not necessarily do so. See Flew, (1951), 56.
- ⁴² Mackie, J. L., (1976), 179-80.
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- ⁵¹ Mackie, J. L., (1976), 180; Grice, H. P., (1941), 341-2.
- ⁵² Parfit, D., (1984), 208.
- ⁵³ Parfit, D., (1984), 207.
- ⁵⁴ Parfit, D., (1984), 205-6.
- ⁵⁵ Garrett, D., (2003), 20-1.

⁵⁶ Grice, H. P., (1941), 341.

⁵⁷ Mackie, J. L., (1976), 181.

⁵⁸ Parfit, D., (1984), 205.

⁵⁹ Garrett, D., (2003), 20-1.

⁶⁰ Gustafsson argues that it is obvious that the Nestor example supports that memory is a sufficient condition for personal identity. See Gustafsson, J. E., (2010), 116.

⁶¹ Weinberg, S., (2011); Yaffe, G., (2011); Strawson, G., (2015).

⁶² Weinberg, S., (2011), 405.

⁶³ If there is a third person perspective, say God, that determines whether a at t1 is conscious of any of b's actions or thoughts at t2, as Weinberg seems to suggest, the sameness of consciousness alone cannot determine personal identity, contrary to Locke's view.

⁶⁴ Weinberg, S., (2012), 392.

⁶⁵ Yaffe, G., (2011), 406.

⁶⁶ Yaffe, G., (2011), 400.

⁶⁷ Yaffe, G., (2011), 406 (*Italics added*).

⁶⁸ Yaffe, G., (2011), 387-8.

⁶⁹ Strawson, G., (2015).

⁷⁰ For similar views, see Behan (1979) and Boeker (2014).

⁷¹ Strawson, G., (2015), 124.

⁷² Ichinose (2013) also agrees that Strawson's interpretation of consciousness is incompatible with Locke's text.