

Reading on the Self: John Locke and Thomas Reid

1 **John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*:**

2 Book II, Chapter XXVII Of Identity and Diversity

3 ... it is not the idea of a thinking or rational being alone that makes the idea of a man in most
4 people's sense: but of a body, so and so shaped, joined to it: and if that be the idea of a man, the
5 same successive body not shifted all at once, must, as well as the same immaterial spirit, go to
6 the making of the same man.

7 9. Personal identity. This being premised, to find wherein personal identity consists, we must
8 consider what person stands for;- which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, that has reason
9 and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and
10 places; which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it
11 seems to me, essential to it: it being impossible for any one to perceive without perceiving that
12 he does perceive. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that
13 we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions: and by this every one is
14 to himself that which he calls self:- it not being considered, in this case, whether the same self be
15 continued in the same or divers substances. For, since consciousness always accompanies
16 thinking, and it is that which makes every one to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes
17 himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness
18 of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action
19 or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now it was then; and it is
20 by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that that action was done.

21 10. Consciousness makes personal identity. . . . But that which seems to make the difficulty is
22 this, that this consciousness being interrupted always by forgetfulness, there being no moment of
23 our lives wherein we have the whole train of all our [184] past actions before our eyes in one
24 view, but even the best memories losing the sight of one part whilst they are viewing another;
25 and we sometimes, and that the greatest part of our lives, not reflecting on our past selves, being
26 intent on our present thoughts, and in sound sleep having no thoughts at all, or at least none with
27 that consciousness which remarks our waking thought - I say, in all these cases, our
28 consciousness being interrupted, and we losing the sight of our past selves, doubts are raised
29 whether we are the same thinking thing, i.e. the same substance or no. Which, however
30 reasonable or unreasonable, concerns not personal identity at all. The question being what makes
31 the same person; and not whether it be the same identical substance, which always thinks in the
32 same person, which, in this case, matters not at all: different substances, by the same
33 consciousness (where they do partake in it) being united into one person, as well as different
34 bodies by the same life are united into one animal, whose identity is preserved in that change of
35 substances by the unity of one continued life. For, it being the same consciousness that makes a
36 man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed solely
37 to one individual substance, or can be continued in a succession of several substances. For as far
38 as any intelligent being can repeat the idea of any past action with the same consciousness it had
39 of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present action; so far it is the same
40 personal self. For it is by the consciousness it has of its present thoughts and actions, that it is
41 self to itself now, and so will be the same self, as far as the same consciousness can extend to
42 actions past or to come and would be by distance of time, or change of substance, no more two
43 persons, than a man be two men by wearing other clothes today than he did yesterday, with a
44 long or a short sleep between: the same consciousness uniting those distant actions into the same
45 person, whatever substances contributed to their production.

1 . . . For should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life,
2 enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, every one sees he
3 would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions: but who
4 would say it was the same man? The body too goes to the making the man, and would, I guess,
5 to everybody determine the man in this case, wherein the soul, with all its princely thoughts
6 about it, would not make another man: but he would be the same cobbler to every one besides
7 himself. . . .

8 **18. Persons, not substances, the objects of reward and punishment.** In this personal identity
9 is founded all the right and justice of reward and punishment; happiness and misery being that
10 for which every one is concerned for himself, and not mattering what becomes of any substance,
11 not joined to, or affected with that consciousness. For, as it is evident in the instance I gave but
12 now, if the consciousness went along with the little finger when it was cut off, that would be the
13 same self which was concerned for the whole body yesterday, as making part of itself, whose
14 actions then it cannot but admit as its own now. Though, if the same body should still live, and
15 immediately from the separation of the little finger have its own peculiar consciousness, whereof
16 the little finger knew nothing, it would not at all be concerned for it, as a part of itself, or could
17 own any of its actions, or have any of them imputed to him.

18 **19. Which shows wherein personal identity consists.** This may show us wherein personal
19 identity consists: not in the identity of substance, but, as I have said, in the identity of
20 consciousness, wherein if Socrates and the present mayor of Queinborough agree, they are the
21 same person: if the same Socrates waking and sleeping do not partake of the same consciousness,
22 Socrates waking and sleeping is not the same person. And to punish Socrates waking for what
23 sleeping Socrates thought, and waking Socrates was never conscious of, would be no more of
24 right, than to punish one twin for what his brother-twin did, whereof he knew nothing, because
25 their outsides were so like, that they could not be distinguished; for such twins have been seen.

26 “Memory,” No. 3 of *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*
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29 Full text accessible at <http://www.earlymoderntexts.com/pdfs/reid1785essay3.pdf>

30 [Chapter 4: Identity (p. 139)]

31 Identity in general I take to be a relation between a thing known to exist at one time and a thing
32 known to have existed at another time. If you ask whether they are one and the same or two
33 different things—for example, ‘Is the professor who persuaded you to take the course the one
34 who gave you an F in it?’—everyone of common sense understands perfectly what your
35 question means. So we can be certain that everyone of common sense has a clear and distinct
36 notion of identity.

37 If you ask for a definition of identity, I confess that I can’t give one; it is too simple a notion to
38 admit of logical definition. . . . I can say that it is a *relation*, but I can’t find words in which to say
39 what marks identity off from other relations, . . . Something that stops existing can’t be the same
40 thing as something that begins to exist at a later time; for this would be to suppose that

- 41 • a thing existed after it had stopped existing,

1 • existed before it was produced,
2 and these are both manifest contradictions. Continued uninterrupted existence is therefore
3 necessarily implied in identity.

4 ...

5 When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person and has lost
6 nothing of his personhood—i.e. he is just as much *a person* as he was before. If he has a leg or
7 an arm cut off, he is the same person that he was before. The amputated limb is no part of his
8 person; if it were, it would have a right to a part of his estate, and be liable for a part of his debts!
9 It would be entitled to a share of his merit and demerit—which is plainly absurd. A person is
10 something indivisible; it is what Leibniz called a ‘monad’.

11 All this may be imagined, not real. How do you know—what evidence do you have—that there
12 *is* such a permanent self that has a claim to all the thoughts, actions, and feelings that you call
13 yours?

14 I answer that the proper evidence I have of all this is *remembering*. ...

15 Although memory gives the most irresistible evidence of my being the same person who did
16 such-and-such a thing at such-and-such a time, I may have other good evidence of things that
17 happened to me and that I don’t remember. I know who gave birth to me and fed me at her
18 breast, but I don’t remember these events.

19 For example: if the same consciousness could be transferred from one thinking being to another
20 (which Locke thinks we can’t show to be impossible), then **two or twenty thinking beings**
21 **could be the same person**. And if a thinking being were to lose the consciousness of the actions
22 he had done (which surely is possible), then he is not the person who performed those actions; so
23 that **one thinking being could be two or twenty different persons** if he lost the consciousness
24 of his former actions two or twenty times.

25 Another consequence of this doctrine (which follows just as necessarily, though Locke probably
26 didn’t see it) is this: A man may *be* and at the same time *not be* the person that performed a
27 particular action.

28 [here follows the **Paradox of the brave officer** used in class] Suppose also (and you have to
29 agree that this is possible) that when he [the officer] took the standard he was conscious of his
30 having been beaten at school, and that when he became a general he was conscious of his taking
31 the standard but had absolutely lost the consciousness of his beating.

32 Given these suppositions, it follows from Locke’s doctrine that he who was beaten at school is
33 the same person who captured the standard, and that he who captured the standard is the same
34 person who was made a general. From which it follows—if there is any truth in logic!—that

35 • the general is the same person as him who was beaten at school.

36 But the general’s consciousness does not reach so far back as his beating, and therefore
37 according to Locke’s doctrine

38 • the general is not the person who was beaten.

39 So the general *is* and at the same time *is not* the person who was beaten at school.