

JOHN LOCKE'S MEMORY THEORY OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

Osemwegie, Taiwo Wesley, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City
wesley.osemwegie@uniben.edu / +2347033209882

&

Victor Oghenechuko Jeko, PhD

Department of Philosophy, Faculty of Arts, University of Benin, Benin City
victor_oghene@yahoo.com / +23408036107994

DOI: 10.13140/RG.2.2.36675.73766

Abstract

This work examines Locke's memory account/theory of personal identity. Apart from being a psychological theory, it is also an appropriation of mental states as a distinct internal experience of the unity of one's own thinking. A thinking being is a conscious being. Though it is extended (using Descartes' term), it is however a whole being characterized by thought which explains the individual as a unity. The aim of the work is to explicate the significance of memory/consciousness as the basis of a person's identity over time. It means that what accounts for the continuous persistence of a person/self as the same person/self over time is the semblance of thought or memory. The work argues that a physiological account of a person's identity is inadequate if proper accountability; praise and blame are to be attached to one's action. The work concludes that in the determination of a person's identity from one day to the next, past, present and future memories of an individual must be the same and that memory-based accounts of personal identity remain relevant and popular hitherto as it embodies what is perhaps the dominant contemporary view.

Keywords: Memory, consciousness, personal identity, person

Introduction

Dominant Theories of personal identity are psychological theory and physiological theory. While the former upholds sameness of memory or consciousness as determining a person's identity over time, the latter argues that the individual's body is simply enough to account for a person's identity. There is apparently no common knowledge or universal theory that aptly suggests the resolution of the problem of personal identity is imminent. Just like the mind/body problem, the problem of personal identity is inconclusive. Though many scholars have propounded new theories, they have turned out to be either intuitive or counter-intuitive.

The core of the problem is epistemic. How do we know that you reading this article now is the same person that had a dinner yesterday? What makes you, who is celebrating his/her fiftieth birthday today as the same baby who celebrated his/her one-year birthday fifty years ago? What makes me who slept yesterday and wake up this morning the same person? Under what condition(s) can we say that a person A at time t1 is the same person B at time t2? While the physiological proponents believe is the same continuous physical body, the psychological proponents on the contrary maintain that it must be sameness of consciousness or memory that determines a person's identity over time.

In this work, our focus is on the memory or consciousness criterion of personal identity. It is important to state that John Locke is the main proponent of memory or consciousness criterion of personal identity. For him, once a person is able to extend his memory backwards to his previous actions/experiences or past memories/thoughts, he is the same person. Thus, what makes a person A at time t1 and a person B at time t2; the person who slept yesterday and wake up this morning; and the person celebrating fiftieth birthday and the baby who celebrated one year birthday fifty years ago is **similarity/sameness of memory**.

The memory theory/criterion of personal identity has also been understood not only as psychological theory or appropriation of mental states but as the distinct internal experience of the unity of one's own thinking. Margaret Atherton is one of the proponents of this view. According to her, "persons are individuated by their consciousness and that there can be a "unity of consciousness" that is different from the "integrative unity" of thinking. That is, we experience a "distinct internality" to thinking (internally distinct and idiosyncratic qualitative features) that is not identical to those mechanisms causally responsible for having thinking at all."ⁱ In what follows, the awareness of mental states such as the seeing of red, as the tasting of wine, as the feeling cold, as the smelling of rotten or decaying substance, as the hearing of cry from an empty building, as mine are the unity of consciousness.

Furthermore, Atherton provided two reasons for arguing that the "integrative unity" of thinking is not the same as the "unity of consciousness". First, that we can imagine some "underlying cause" of the unity of our thought and ideas that allowed for two distinct consciousnesses, and second, that given his arguments against Descartes, Locke would not want to say that we know that what provides an essential integrative unity to our "thoughts, desires, and powers to move" is conscious thought.ⁱⁱ

The existentialists' argument that we recreate who we are (ourselves) through our actions seems to suggest that there is no static perception or conception of a person. Consciousness for Locke, as also adduced by Descartes seems to be the only thing that is static or that we are certain of. The idea that we cannot anchor personal persistence on the body has been further demonstrated by the depersonalized schizophrenic patients who feel fragmented in time in spite of having enough memories of themselves in the past, still feel this way: "I feel as parts of a whole person, but never at the same time. It is difficult to explain (. . .) I constantly have to ask myself 'who am I really?' (. . .) Most of the time, I have this very strange thing: I watch closely, like, how am I doing now and where are the 'parts' (. . .) I think about that so much that I get to nothing else. It is not easy when you change from day to day. As if you were a totally different person all of a sudden."ⁱⁱⁱ

Trying to recollect or reconstruct what one has done in the past sometimes end in uncertainty. Does this buttress or render the argument of the psychological proponents true about who we are? The highlight of the problem by Fuchs is apt: "every morning the latter patient attempted to reconstruct exactly what he had done the day before to be sure that he was still the same person. Yet he could never attain complete certainty, in the end musing about whether at some time he had not previously been replaced by a different person."^{iv}

1. Memory Criterion/Theory of Personal Identity

Memory is central to the discussion of personal identity. The memory-based account of personal identity stems from Locke's use of the term in describing the idea of consciousness as the necessary desideratum in the determination of personal identity. Though Locke did not really call his theory memory criterion, many thinkers have come to attribute memory criterion to Locke's account of personal identity because of his use of the term "remembrance" and "memory". Locke had argued in his essay, Book II, chapter 27, "of Identity and Diversity" that same person 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.

Locke used of the term memory appeared when he attempted a distinction or to differentiate between the idea of man and the idea of person affirming that absolute oblivion separates what is thus forgotten from the person, but not from the man: "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 once was conscious of, though I have now forgotten them?"^v

The emphasis is on sameness of consciousness if the person who existed yesterday is to be regarded as the same person who continues to exist today. The point is that a person who existed yesterday, let call it x and a person existing today, call it y are the same person if and only if they share the same consciousness. The condition for a person at yesterday (x) and a person today (y) to share the same consciousness is highlighted by Locke in the following claim: “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.”^{vi} Thus, for a person at yesterday and a person today to be the same self or person, not different persons, both shared the same consciousness or possess the same memory. Hence, this explains why Locke’s theory is sometimes called ‘memory’ theory of personal identity. For x and y to be the same person is for them to share the same consciousness; and for them to share the same consciousness is for y to be able to remember (or ‘repeat the idea of’) elements of the consciousness of x .^{vii}

It is as a result of the use of the term ‘memory’ that some thinkers have come to interpret Locke’s theory of personal identity as memory criterion or psychological criterion. It is argued that memory has been viewed by many philosophers since John Locke as key to explaining personal identity through time and that Locke (1731) viewed memory as constitutive of personal identity; Thomas Reid (1785) and Joseph Butler (1736) took memory to be evidence of it and David Hume (1739/2000), whilst denying that persons persist, acknowledged that memory provides a powerful illusion of such persistence.^{viii} However, while the following scholars – Flew (1951), Mackie (1976), Parfit (1984) and Noonan (1989) think that Locke famously viewed identity to consist solely in memory, Gustafsson (2010) have argued that Locke never explicitly endorsed this view but argued that he held a weaker view. Albeit, memory-based accounts of personal identity remain relevant and popular hitherto as it embodies what is perhaps the dominant contemporary view – Shoemaker (1970), Shoemaker & Swinburne (1984); Perry (1975a); Lewis (1976); Parfit (1984); Noonan (1989).

Accordingly, a person P at time t is identical to a person P^1 at a later time t^1 if P at t^1 remembers P ’s experiences at t^2 . Since identity is transitive, it can also arise from overlapping strands of such memory links: if P^2 at t^2 does not remember P ’s experiences at t , P^2 at t^2 and P at t are nevertheless identical if P^2 at t^2 remembers P^1 ’s experiences at t^1 , and if P^1 at t^1 remembers P ’s experiences at t^3 .^{ix}

Given the circularity criticism posed by Thomas Reid, and since we remember only our own experiences, memory-based accounts are often replaced with the

notion of memory with that of quasi-memory in order to avoid or escape the charge of circularity. Roache renders the argument thus: “defenders of memory-based accounts escape the charge of circularity by arguing that, when they say that identity consists in memory, what they mean is that it consists in quasi-memory subject to certain constraints. These constraints are specified without presupposing personal identity between quasi-rememberer and subject of quasi-remembered experiences.”^x

What then is quasi-memory? The view offered by Derek Parfit, while elaborating on Sydney Shoemaker’s (1970) idea is apt when he defined quasi-memory thus: “I have a quasi-memory of an experience if I seem to remember having the experience, *someone* had the experience.”^{xi} It is germane to point out that “those who appeal to the notion of quasi-memory in accounting for identity claim that ordinary memory is a sub-category of quasi-memory. From my quasi-memory of doing *X*, I cannot infer that *I* did *X*, but I can infer that somebody did *X*. whether I am identical with the doer of *X* depends on what personal identity consists in.”^{xii}

Though the memory-based account of personal identity has been viewed to consist of a well-known problem – the view that persons cease to exist during moments not later remembered, i.e., you will recall that a person *P* at time *t* is identical to a person *P*¹ at a later time *t*¹ if *P* at *t*¹ remembers *P*’s experiences at *t*², where *P* at *t*¹ fails to remember *P*’s experiences then a person *P* ceases to be identical to *P* at *t*¹. Contemporary memory-based theorists have provided argument to escape this problem. For example, Slors (2001) argued that memory should be viewed as evidence of identity and not constitutive of it; i.e., memory does not constitute identity; it is rather an evidence of identity.^{xiii}

Similarly, but contrary to Slors’ argument, thinkers such as Shoemaker (1970), Perry (1975a), Lewis (1976), Parfit (1984) and Noonan (1989) take identity to be constituted by memory alongside other forms of psychological continuity, such as the persistence of personality traits, beliefs, values, and so on.^{xiv} Expanding the view of memory further as constitutive of identity, Shoemaker argued that memory is important in accounting for identity because it is evidence of the sort of causal dependence of later psychological states on earlier ones that on his views, is required for personal persistence; yet provided that other forms of psychological continuity can be taken to involve similar relations of causal dependence, continuity of non-memory psychological states “has as good a claim to be constitutive of a fact of personal identity” as does continuity of memory.”^{xv} Shoemaker further claims that “[r]emembering is best seen as just a special, albeit very important, case of the retention of acquired mental states.”^{xvi}

More re-assuring of the role and place of memory to the personal identity debate is the view expressed by Marc Slors thus:

To be sure, memory is not thought to exhaust psychological continuity, but neither is it considered to be an optional ingredient. In fact, contemporary conceptions of psychological continuity evolved by adding various kinds of psychological connections between person-stages-connections such as those established by perpetuated beliefs, values, and character traits or by relations between intentions and actions – to John Locke’s memory criterion of identity; this criterion is held to be too tight, but correct in spirit.^{xvii}

Though Locke’s memory account of personal identity has been somewhat lauded for perhaps accurately and plausibly accounting for the possibility of Christian’s resurrection of the dead on the last day and most importantly drawing explicitly the distinction between the idea of man, its identity and the idea of person, its identity, Klein and Nichols have demonstrated through a research that though memory is central to the discussion of personal identity, it does not convey the idea of “mineness” that usually accompanies our memories. The argument of Klein and Nichols is that the idea of memories lacks the sense of “mineness” usually conveyed by memory. They take R. B.’s case to show that the sense of mineness is merely a contingent feature of memory, which they see as raising two problems for memory-based accounts of personal identity. First, they see it as potentially undermining the appeal of memory-based accounts. Second, they take it to show that the conception of quasi-memory that underpins many memory-based accounts is inadequate.^{xviii} This argument of Klein and Nichols as well as the intended implications is stated thus:

Stanley Klein and Shaun Nichols introduced patient R.B., whose memories, after he was hit by a car, were left devoid of the sense of “mineness” that usually accompanies our memories. Klein and Nichols take R.B.’s case to demonstrate that this sense of mineness is “a contingent feature of memory”. . . They see this as having two important implications for the relationship between memory and the metaphysics of personal identity. First, they see it as potentially undermining memory-based accounts of personal identity by undermining the appeal of such accounts. Second, they draw on it to raise a problem for Parfit’s canonical characterization of quasi-memory. Since the plausibility of memory-based accounts of

personal identity depends upon the coherence of the concept of quasi-memory, this constitutes a further blow for such accounts.^{xix}

Klein and Nichols arrived at this conclusion above by analyzing long-term memory as comprising two memory-systems – procedural and declarative. The latter for them correspond to Gilbert Ryle’s “knowing how” and the former “knowing that”. They analyzed declarative memory further into two sub-divisions – semantic and episodic memories. According to them, semantic memory “contains relatively generic, context-free information about the world such as Grapes are edibles, 2+2= 4 and Sacramento is the capital of California.”^{xx} Recalling semantic memories involves recalling or bringing to mind information without necessarily recalling or recollecting the experience of acquiring it. Episodic memory, on the other hand, involves “re-experiencing one’s past.”^{xxi}

For them, episodic memory “represents the “what, where, when” of an event. As such, it is experienced as a memory that makes explicit reference to the time and place of its acquisition. Examples of episodic memory are I remember eating chicken for supper yesterday evening, I recall my meeting with Judith last Monday.”^{xxii} Furthermore, for Klein and Nichols, philosophical discussions of the role and place of memory in personal identity by and large, focuses on episodic memory and that semantic memory involves in some aspects of self-knowledge, that it is only episodic memory that can convey a sense of the self-persisting.^{xxiii}

It is from this understanding and background presented by Roache that Klein and Nichols introduce the case of R. B. after, being hit by a car, forty-three-year-old R. B. suffered physical injuries along with cognitive and memory impairments: “R. B. was able to remember particular incidents from his life accompanied by temporal, spatial, and self-referential knowledge, but he did not feel the memories he experienced belonged to him. In his words, they lacked “ownership”. This particular form of memory impairment – episodic recollection absents- a sense of personal ownership, is a form of memory dissociation that, to our knowledge, has not previously been documented in the neurological literature.”^{xxiv}

The argument of Klein and Nichols for short is that it is possible to have a memory of a past event without being mine – the implication of this is an attempt to dislodge the psychological account of personal identity – that once I can extend my memory to the past, I am the same person as that past person who had the experiences. Whereas, on the contrary, Klein and Nichols say that having an experience of a past event does not make it mine.

However, Rebecca Roache in her work “Memory and Mineness in Personal identity,” plausibly provides argument in defense of memory-based account of personal identity that Klein and Nichols’ characterization of R. B.’s experience is implausible and as a result, the problems that they describe for memory-based accounts of personal identity do not arise. Roache argued further that Klein and Nichols’ conception of R. B.’s case is untenable on the following grounds: (i) that Klein and Nichols view themselves as taking R. B.’s talk of ownership at face value: “R. B. himself initiated use of the language of ‘ownership’ we simply adopt his expression”^{xxv} and that they offered no analysis of this “language of ‘ownership’”.

(ii) That they write as if, aside from lacking mineness, R. B.’s memories were intact; i.e. as if the lack of mineness was the only way in which R. B.’s memories were unusual. As Roache buttressed “they do not state this explicitly, but they make many remarks that collectively are strongly indicative of this integration. For example, they tell us that R. B.’s memory, “though fitting the standard criteria for episodic recollection, was not accompanied by a sense of personal ownership.”^{xxvi}

(iii) That they also write of episodic memories being composed of two separate components, content and mineness and so on. (iv) That they move very quickly – in their concluding paragraph– from the claim that mineness is a contingent by-product of memory to the claim that it may not reflect “the reality of identity” whereas they do not explain how their conception of R. B.’s unusual experiences raises problems for memory-based accounts. A more robust defense *inter-alia* is this point presented by Roache thus:

Episodic memory is not merely a capacity to represent one’s past experienced; it is a faculty for non-inferential knowledge about one’s past. In normal circumstances, remembering X is sufficient for (fallible) knowing that X occurred. These normal circumstances involve, *inter alia*, recognizing our memories as such: to derive knowledge that X occurred from one’s memory of X, one must be able to distinguish remembering X from other attitudes toward X, including imagining. Were our memories routinely to lack a feeling of memory, we would be unable to make such distinctions without drawing inferences from external information, such as the reports of others. In this case, episodic memory would not be a faculty for non-inferential knowledge about the past. Consequently, the feeling of memory is not a contingent feature of episodic memory; neither, therefore, is mineness.^{xxvii}

The clear message of Roache is that it is impossible for memory to routinely lack a feeling of memory and concluded that “since what is conceptually impossible cannot be nomologically possible, my conclusion undermines Klein and Nichols’ claim that it is nomologically possible for memory routinely to lack mineness.”^{xxviii}

2. Conclusion

So far we have exhaustively discussed the memory criterion and its role in the determination of a person’s identity over time. It is germane to state that memory criterion clearly situates responsibility of actions to individual. As a result, an individual cannot absolve himself/herself from praise or blame. This is difficulty if the physical/bodily criterion of personal identity is to determine the reidentification of a person’s identity over time. Moral responsibility is hinged on the common knowledge that all humans are rational, since each human possesses a thinking faculty. Though the actual substance/nature of the human being is yet to be fully resolved philosophically, as different schools of thought see humans from diverse perspective – as purely mind (idealist), as matter/body (materialist) and mind and body (dualist), yet which of these substances (mind or body) is moral responsibility to be situated? This is the advantage of the memory/consciousness criterion. It clearly stipulates that moral reward – praise or blame is to be situated on the person who is a forensic being and is conscious of himself as himself in Locke’s terms.

More so, if an individual cannot extend his/her memory backwards to his/her past/previous experiences/thoughts, the individual is no longer the same person as the person in the past. This raises a serious implication. It implies that there can be many persons in one individual/human being. Assuming that an individual’s memory is interrupted ten times, the implication is that, since the individual cannot extend backwards his memory, the individual will be ten different persons. This is manifestly absurd.

In all, the theories of personal identity do not straightforwardly help in the resolution of the problem and the question—who are we or what am I? Considered, either as an epistemological or metaphysical concern; still does not clear the air on the determination of our identity as humans. Rather, the many theories further complicated the debate. It is imperative, if philosophizing about the nature of man and society and the understanding of our self must be completely deciphered. It is not only to assert that there will be resurrection of the self/soul on the last day but with what form and identity will the individual

resurrected takes is another question. It is quite disturbing not to be certain about man's place and purpose in the universe without adequately answering questions that border on his/her existence and persistence hereafter.

Endnotes

-
- ⁱ. Atherton, Margaret, "Locke's Theory of Personal Identity", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 8 (1983): 288
- ⁱⁱ. Weinberg, Shelley, "The Coherence of Consciousness in Locke's Essay", in *History of Philosophy Quarterly*, vol. 25, (2008)
- ⁱⁱⁱ. de Haan, S., & Fuchs, T., "The Ghost in the Machine: Disembodiment in Schizophrenia, Two Case Studies", *Psychopathology*, 43, (2010), p. 329
- ^{iv}. *Ibid.*
- ^v. Locke, J., Book II, Chapter 27: "Of Identity and Diversity", retrieved from www.homepages.umflint.edu/~simoncu/360/locke.pdf. 19/06/2018
- ^{vi}. *Ibid.*, p. 10
- ^{vii}. See Jeff, Speaks, "Locke's Psychological Theory of Personal Identity", PHL20208 Papers, Oct., 3, 2006. Retrieved from <https://www.3.nd.edu/courses-2006-7>, 05/12/2018. 11:00am
- ^{viii}. Roache, Rebecca, "Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity", in *Philosophical Psychology*, January, (2015)
- ^{ix}. Roache, Rebecca, "Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity", *Op. Cit.*, p. 2-3
- ^x. *Ibid.*, p. 3
- ^{xi}. Parfit, Derek, *Reason and Persons*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), p. 220
- ^{xii}. Roache, Rebecca, "Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity", *Op. Cit.*, p. 3
- ^{xiii}. See Slors, M., "Personal Identity, Memory and Circularity: An Alternative for Q-Memory", *Journal of Philosophy*, 98, 4, (2001), pp. 186-214
- ^{xiv}. Roache, Rebecca, "Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity", *Op. Cit.*, p. 8
- ^{xv}. Shoemaker, S., "Identity, Properties, and Causality", in *Midwest Studies in Philosophy*, 4 (1), (1979), p. 326
- ^{xvi}. Shoemaker, S., "Personal Identity: A Materialist's Account", in S. Shoemaker and R. G. Swinburne (Eds.), *Personal Identity*, (New York: Blackwell, 1984), p. 90
- ^{xvii}. Slors, M., "Personal Identity, Memory and Circularity: An Alternative for Q-Memory", *Op. Cit.*, pp. 186-187
- ^{xviii}. Roache, Rebecca, "Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity", *Op. Cit.*, p. 2
- ^{xix}. *Ibid.*, p. 3
- ^{xx}. Klein, S. and Nichols, S., "Memory and the Sense of Personal Identity", *Mind*, 121 (483), (2012), p. 679., cited in Roache, Rebecca, "Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity", *Op. Cit.*, p. 4
- ^{xxi}. *Ibid.*, p. 680
- ^{xxii}. *Ibid.*, p. 679
- ^{xxiii}. *Ibid.*, p. 680
- ^{xxiv}. *Ibid.*, p. 684

^{xxv}. *Ibid.*, p. 685

^{xxvi}. Roache, Rebecca, “Memory and Mineness in Personal Identity”, *Op. Cit.*, p. 5

^{xxvii}. *Ibid.*, p. 17

^{xxviii}. *Loc. Cit.*