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John Locke and Self-Awareness

I once had a roommate I had not heard from for a few days. He sometimes was away for several days without telling me just where he was going, and so I was not worried. Then one day I receive a telephone call. The man on the other end of the line was very weak. He would hardly talk. Then I realize it was my roommate. He had been shot, was operated on, and now lay in a hospital bed so weak he could hardly talk.

A man had robbed his uncle's store where my roommate worked, and my roommate had gone after the robber. The robber shot my roommate in the abdomen and neck. My roommate finally had almost a complete recovery. He was in psychotherapy for a time. After a several months he said he came to realize that he was trying to commit suicide by going after the robber even though that is not what he believed at first.

This paper is an attempt to give a brief account of John Locke's account of the *self* and state one criticism of that account by entertaining doubt as to Locke's alleged certainty about the nature of self-knowledge.

First, here is a brief account of Locke's theory as gleaned from class readings and discussions, and from the suggested readings of Professor Talia Bettcher.¹

Locke says we intuit our own existence. We cannot doubt we exist. It is interesting that he says in Book 4, Chapter 9, section 3, that no proof is possible, yet he goes ahead and gives a proof anyway! And the proof he gives is Descartes' proof.² Note that Locke does not say he exists, therefore, he feels pain. If both are equally known, then one might have one as a proof for the other. It would seem *prima facie* that one would be just as likely to be the thing proving as the other. Perhaps one could say that the two (self and pain) are tied together, but that pain is more specific than self, and, therefore, one can more easily point to the specific to go to the general, but that both are still equally intuitive, (but Locke does not explicitly say that).

We still do not know what the self is, or personal identity, or what person is. A person says Locke is:

¹ Locke, *Essay* Book 4, Chapter 9, section and Chapter 10, section 2; and Book 2, Chapter 27, section 9-17.

² Perhaps, however, he uses more than Descartes' *ideas* as proof, for Locke also uses *feeling*, and I am not sure Descartes consider feelings ideas.

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. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel meditate, or will any thing, we know that we do so. . . in this alone consists *personal Identity*, *i.e.* the sameness of a rational Being: and 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. (Book II, Chapter XXVII, section 9)

The problem of personal identity would be easier to comprehend if we were conscious all the time of all our thoughts, but we sleep and forget some things, and can only think of a few things at one time. Yet we still remember past actions, and as long as we remember those actions we are the same person that did those actions.³ The substance or substances of the individual can change; that is of no account; only the same consciousness matters. If after awakening we remember the past, we are the same person as remembered in the past. Cut off a hand and the substance of the self may vary, but the personal identity does not.

Continuing into section 12, Locke asks:

But the Question is, whether if the same Substance, which thinks, be changed, it can be the same Person, or remaining the same, it can be different Persons. (Book II, Chapter XXVII)

Locke says this question does not come up for those who place thought purely in the material, for then identity is considered only as what he calls animal Identity, which is Identity of Life, the same life. As regards the first part of the question he does not know for sure whether if one's thinking Substance changes one is the same person because he does not have enough data,

³ Note the problem discussed in another class on the meaning of life that if a person remembers event A at time t^1 and has forgotten event A by time t^2 yet remembers time t^1 , he is not in Locke's thinking the same person as he was when event A happened although he is the same person as at time t^1 who did remember event A. Plus if at t^2 the person remembers something even further back in time than event A his personal identity goes back even further than perhaps even when he was at time t^1 ; therefore, he is both younger and older than himself. Or perhaps with respect to event A his is no longer the same person, but with respect to event B which happened even longer ago he is the same person.

yet if the same consciousness can be transferred to another thinking Substance, then personal identity can be preserved even if there are more than one thinking Substances.

As to the second part of the question, Locke thinks that there is a thinking Substance⁴ and that there is the possibility that the thinking Substance may forget all of its past actions and become a different person. Reincarnation in which the past life would not be remembered would be an example of this, but if the person ever remembered the past life, he would be the same person as that who lived the past life.

In section 15 Locke discusses whether a man would be the same man if the soul of a prince went into the body of a cobbler just as the soul of the cobbler left its body. He says there are Spirits, Man, and Person to consider. Locke's thinking seems to be confused at this point. He says that every one would see that the prince in the cobbler's body would be the same Person as the prince and accountable for the prince's actions, but who would say it was the same Man. Therefore, Locke guesses people would say the body makes the Man, but the cobbler (i.e. who looks like the cobbler) would consider himself the Prince. Locke says, "[I]n the ordinary way of speaking, the same Person, and the same Man, stand for the same thing." (p. 340 line 18-20, section 15⁵) Yet Locke thinks that these three ideas namely *Spirit, Man, and Person* can be given meaningful definitions that can be kept straight in our thinking. For Locke the same consciousness is the same as the same Person.

The *self* is a conscious thinking thing with concerns of pleasure and pain and concern for itself. If a finger is cut off, the consciousness is no longer concerned about the finger. If consciousness went with the finger, the finger would not be concerned about the body.⁶

⁴ I do not know why Locke capitalized so many words substance being one of them, but I am following him in the instance.

⁵ Edited by Peter H. Nidditch, Oxford at the Clarendon Press, 1975

⁶ There are phantom limbs for people that have lost a limb. I do not think Locke addresses that situation.

How does Locke distinguish self and substance?

After listening to Talia Bettcher in class and from the readings, it would seem that the substance is the Soul and the self is a mode or attribute (I am not sure which). Locke thinks the Self is consciousness whatever substance it may be in whether spiritual or material. (However, he thinks it is not just material.) But from class notes Bettcher says that while Descartes thought that substances has properties and he knew what those properties were i.e. *matter*, extension, *mind*, thinking, Locke says that he believes there are substances, but he does not know what properties they have. He has no clear and distinct ideas of substance. Therefore, unlike Descartes, Locke does not think the substance of the self must be thinking all the time. When we sleep, he says, we may not be thinking; whereas, Descartes has to say that we think all the time, or we do not exist; we just forget sometimes as, for example, in sleep.⁷

For Locke the substance of the Self is not as important as one might think because the Substance does not define the Self, rather Self is defined by consciousness. It matters not that one or many substances support consciousness or that substances change over time. It is awareness and memory that are important. Of substances we can know very little, yet something does not come from nothing; therefore, there must be something to support the modes and accidents of consciousness; therefore, substances exist even if Locke could find no properties in them besides support of modes and accidents.

Locke was a bold thinker for his day considering the *Zeitgeist* he lived in which was attuned to Substance, Modes and Accidents. But one might still expect that he has not thought through all that needs to be considered. Returning to the first quote, Locke said:

⁷ Note that Locke may have problems with reconciling his belief that no one thing can have two beginnings and saying that the *self*, i.e. consciousness, ceases during sleep and starts up again.

It being impossible for anyone to perceive, without perceiving, that he does perceive. When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will any thing, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present Sensations and Perceptions(Book II, Chapter XXVII, section 9)

But is it not questionable as to whether we always perceive that we perceive?

Consider that the brain – whose activity seems to correlate with mental activity in some ways – is something like a computer such that it is sometimes overloaded. When very busy the computer and by analogy the mind can do only one task at a time. The mind may perceive, for example, but not perceive that it is perceiving.

As a child sometimes when I went to the movies – which was rarely – I would realize after a time that I had not been aware of anything else but the movie. It was only afterwards that I became aware of my surroundings and perhaps even of myself. It frightened me a little. I would make a point next time I went to the movies of trying to be aware of what I was doing and where I was.

Consider that we have nerves to block unwanted background noises so we can hear a conversation in a noisy environment. Might it also be true that there are similar mechanisms to limit self-awareness? If there are, then we could go for a period of time with awareness but without self-awareness. Perhaps an MRI experiment would show inactivity in the self-awareness area of the brain under certain conditions similar to experiments showing lack of time awareness during certain meditation techniques.

In *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* Volume 2 under “Consciousness: Self-Knowledge” the author considers that we are not always aware of what we are aware of. The term “... ‘introspection’ is used to refer to the act of observing one’s mental states and ‘self-knowledge’ or ‘knowledge’ to the achievement of that knowledge” (p.192). Leibniz is reported as saying that Locke’s view leads to an infinite regress, for every self-knowledge is in turn a

mental state which leads to yet another introspection. The author of the article, Charles Landesman, Jr., does not think that this is a problem unless there is a difference between what one knows and one's knowing that one knows it, and he points out that people are sometimes mistaken about what they think they know or do not know, and so there is a problem. But it seems to me there is still a problem even if we were not mistake about what we know, for our thinking is limited. How could we, therefore, think of an infinite number of things seemingly all at once?

The regress can be avoided if one is only aware of first-order mental states. First-order mental states are defined as those that are not about other mental states. Yet still some object that even in this simpler view, one must know the terms and concept of what it is one is observing to observe it. If a person does know the concepts, many people question that knowledge, for there might be unconscious first-order states, such that one is mistaken about one's motives, desires or beliefs.

My knowledge of Wittgenstein is very limited, but I toy with the ideas that I associate with him. Wittgenstein believed there is no private language.⁸ Therefore, one cannot know the workings of one's own mind without knowing also the working of other people's minds. There has to be a public database to form a rule, and rules can only occur if there is repetition and another person to verify the rule is being followed. Therefore, we cannot introspect about things that are not in the public domain. Perhaps that is where some of the problems of introspection come from: people trying to introspect about things that are not a part of the general language

⁸ See *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy* p. 339 (the end of the article about Wittgenstein) for a discussion about not being able to have private languages.

game. Perhaps, therefore, introspection cannot go any further – or at least much further – than the language and culture will allow.⁹

Other objections can be raised. For example, consider that attending to an experience may modify that experience, such that the only way to try to overcome the problem is to think about it immediately afterwards, to retrospect, but memory is faulty even for a short time.

It seems to me that we may be programmed through evolution to introspect on those things that are useful for us; other things would be below awareness. Also there may be things that are not possible to introspect about. The eye cannot see itself. Can the mind “see” all that is there? How can it see its own introspecting? If it tried, would there not be an infinite regress, but the mind is limited and can only think of a limited number of things.

In conclusion, there are many problems with self-awareness that Locke never seems to have thought about such as why we do not know why we did something, but we can give him great credit for starting us thinking about the self and considering the nature of consciousness.

⁹ I may be misrepresenting Professor Price, but I believe she said one time that philosophy was defined as defining terms, for it is only when one has terms and, therefore, concepts about something that one can think about it.

A Partial Bibliography

The Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Macmillan and Free Press, New York, 1967.

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