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Identity and Person: Locke on Personal Identity

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"If, after I die, someone should choose to write my biography,
Nothing could be simpler.
There are only two dates—that of my birth and that of my death.
Between one and the other, all the days were mine."
Fernando Pessoa

"Worldly faces never look so worldly as at a funeral."
George Eliot

Abstract

We sustain in this essay, that the criterion of personal identity for Locke is not memory but consciousness. Therefore, for Locke, memory is the power of knowledge of the same consciousness.

Keywords: Locke; Reid; Consciousness; Memory; Personal identity

I

Personal identity, in philosophical terms, expresses a problem that began to be systematically analyzed since the end of the 17th century, with the advent of the Enlightenment, and which, even today, is the subject of enormous philosophical controversy. Essentially, it is a question of clarifying the expression "personal identity". In it, two terms are played, "identity" and "person", with "personal identity" being the identity that is inherent to the fact of being a person.

How to understand the term "identity" in this context? The risks associated with this category are known and were summarized by Wittgenstein in the *Tractatus*: "to say of two things that they are identical is nonsense, and to say of one thing that it is identical with itself is to say nothing at all [1]." (5.5303). In simple terms, Wittgenstein wants to show us that the relationship of identity cannot have ontological meaning. Two objects can never be identical, under penalty of being the same thing, after all. Nevertheless, if they are, the same thing, what sense does it make to speak of identity?

However, this last doubt turns out to be, indeed, absurd. As Kripke points out, if that were the case, no one could be your worst enemy, your worst critic, etc., i.e., there could not be a reflexive relationship within the same being, which is false. "Some relations are reflexive [...]. Identity [...] is nothing

but the smallest reflexive relation. (1980: 108n) [2].

To transcend this paradox is to clarify the distinction between two types of identity, "qualitative" and "numerical". In the case of qualitative identity, we say that two things are identical when they share properties. Thus, we say that two leaves of a tree are so similar that we could almost say they are the same leaf or that two twins are so identical that we often confuse them. However, this kind of identity is irrelevant to the philosophical problem of personal identity. The same cannot be said concerning the numerical one, since it is this that is at stake. In the case of numerical identity, we say that two occurrences of a thing do not constitute two different things, but that they are, instead, occurrences of the same thing.

Let us see an example mentioned by the Portuguese philosopher Pedro Galvão [3]:

> "Human beings change constantly. Is it correct to speak of personal identity over time? With so many differences between, for example, Locke at 15 and Locke at 60, how can we say that they are the same person? In the sense of the 'same', the one that corresponds to the concept of qualitative identity, Locke at 60 is not the same person he was at 15. The sexagenarian has very different qualities from those of the teenager. However, despite being qualitatively different, the sexagenarian and the adolescent are numerically identical. Therefore, the expressions 'Locke at 15' and 'Locke at 60' refer to one person, not two. To clarify the distinction between the two types of identity, we'll say that multiple copies of *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* may be qualitatively identical, but they are numerically distinct."

However, confusion between these two ways of thinking is common, with disastrous consequences in understanding personal identity. It is precisely because people change their characteristics to such an extent that they often find it difficult to recognize themselves in past images and gestures that the question of personal identity emerges as a glaring one.

II

In Western philosophy, we can find multiple theories about personal identity within the scope of the "analytical" school (e.g., Parfit, Nagel, Olson) and "continental" (e.g., Arendt, MacIntyre, Ricoeur). My essay will not focus on the multiplicity of theses sustained today, but rather on the first systematic exposition of the problem, formulated by Locke in the second edition of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* (1694[2]).

> "To find wherein *personal identity* consists, we must consider what *Person* stands for; - which, I think, is a thinking intelligent being, *that* (...) *can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing, in different times and places.*" (2.27.9)

The characterization of the concept of person implies that, in addition to different properties, such as thought and intelligence, we know how to account for the power or ability to apprehend oneself, whether in the present moment or over time.

Let us then focus our attention to how Locke presents personal identity. After all, what is at stake when we use that same expression in philosophical terms? It is not to be confused with character, in the same way, it is situated on a very different plane from the different social roles that we can play. These questions are ultimately irrelevant to the philosophical issue that concerns us. What is this identity of being a person, after all?

> "It is that [consciousness] which makes everyone to be what he calls *self*, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists *personal Identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being" (2.27.9).

Consciousness is, thus, in this view, the answer to the question of personal identity. Any person preserves his identity if he is conscious of himself, which means that he loses it when consciousness dissolves. Undoubtedly, the metaphysical uniqueness of this being does not disappear when, for some reason, it is not conscious. However, if he is not conscious, it will hardly be possible to recognize it as such and, therefore, whether it is the same is entirely indifferent to him.

The Lockean thesis on personal identity is usually presented as defending the primacy of memory. It is a very imprecise interpretation because for Locke one could lose his memory and preserve his personal identity.

In philosophical terms, we should instead make the following distinction. On the one hand, there is the *core personal identity* which is, at the limit, self-awareness. Thus, a being, for example, a biological organism, preserves its personal identity if it is aware of itself.

"Personal Identity can by us be placed in nothing but consciousness, (which is that alone which makes what we call *self*) without involving us in great Absurdities." (2.27.21)

However, our existence is intrinsically temporal, which means that we recognize ourselves over time. It is in this

context that Locke introduces the question of memory. Thus, after characterizing personal identity as the act of self-awareness, he will say:

> "As far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past Action or Thought, so far reaches the Identity of that *Person*" (2.27.9).

Nevertheless, what is decisive is always the identity inherent in the act of being conscious.

> "It is impossible to make personal Identity to consist in anything but consciousness; or reach any farther than that does." (2.27.21)

As we said, the usual interpretation of Locke's thinking on this issue consists of privileging the concept of memory, something that, in our view, makes perfect sense in Bergson's philosophy but not in Locke's. Where does this misinterpretation come from? It results from a pervasive logical error that confuses the *ratio cognoscendi* with the *ratio essendi*, knowledge and being. If we consult contemporary works on the problem of personal identity, in that case, the question is usually posed, for example, in the following terms: "what are the logically necessary and sufficient conditions for a person P_2 at time t_2, being the same person as a person P_1, until an earlier time t_1" (Shoemaker/Swinburne, 1984: 3) [4]. Locke's answer, as we have seen, is consciousness. However, when we ask ourselves what allows us to say that we are the same in times past, the usual answer is the faculty of memory. The answer is, however, incorrect, or at least incomplete. Locke wonders what makes a person the same in the past and future times, and in different spaces and times. It's not just a matter of times gone by. But even if that were the case, what would guarantee it was the conscience, being the memory an instrument of knowledge in past times of the preservation of the same conscience. Memory, in these cases, functions as a *ratio cognoscendi* of being a person or, in metaphorical terms, with the light that illuminates the past and allows the recognition of the same consciousness. The question, for Locke, is not whether memory is the same but whether it is the same consciousness.

III

Locke's thesis has been the subject of several criticisms. Insofar as the criterion of personal identity has been mistakenly identified with memory, it is natural that the criticism has focused on this theme. The most famous criticism was formulated by Thomas Reid and is still presented today as a logical refutation of the Locke an thesis. Reid maintained that continuity of memory was not a necessary or sufficient criterion for making a person numerically the same at different times. In addition, the so-called courageous military objection is well known. Reid imagines about a child who was punished for having once stolen an orchard, who later pursued a military career and became a general at the end of his life.

> "But the general's consciousness does not reach so far back as his flogging; therefore, according to Mr. Locke's doctrine, he is not a person who was flogged. Therefore, the general is, and at the same time is not, the same person with him who was flogged at school." (*Essays* 249) [5].

Locke thus seems to have committed a logical contradiction by calling into question one of the properties of identity, namely transitivity: A=B & B=C → A=C, where A=general, B=officer at the beginning of his career, and C=child.

In the face of this paradox, several argumentative strategies emerged that support the coherence of Locke's fundamental thesis. Undoubtedly, the best known (e.g., Paul Grice) [6] is to say that the paradox is resolved if we pay attention to the psychological continuity of a person's mental state. The general may no longer remember his childhood pranks, but it is credible to suppose a line of continuity of memories between the general's present consciousness and that child's consciousness. There is a chain of recollections, or if one prefers a causal dependence of mental states, that guarantees the value of the criterion of the psychological continuity of personal identity. It is a coherent, valid argument, but I doubt Locke would accept it. It deviates the point of view from which Locke's question had been claimed and which is, in my view, that of self-awareness, the point of view of the "first person".

> "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 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. And the same man being presumed to be the same person, I is easily here supposed to stand also for the same person." (2.27.20)

Therefore, Reid's argument is not valid. Being a personal human being implies two properties: (1) being a living human being and (2) being self-aware. Hence, Simon Blackburn's remark on this problem seems to us well-advised [7]:

> "So perhaps Reid's argument that you cannot have A = B, B = C, but not A = C, only goes through if each of

> A, B, C is simple, not composite. Now, as we saw, Reid himself held that the soul was simple, but Locke did not, so perhaps the argument does not count against him. (*Think* 65) [8].

We can thus conclude that if the same human being has distinct consciousness's, incommunicable with each other, then this means that the same man can be, *at different times* (it should be emphasized), different people, *although from the perspective of the first person — of the consciousness of himself —, of his identity, he will always be the same person for himself.*

Locke ignores the nature of the substance that guarantees this "self-consciousness" because, as he tells us, a substance is this "complex idea" of "something I know not what" or, if you prefer, "whatever". "Locke's theory of substance avoids two still common errors. The first is to suppose that there exists time-dodging stuff that upholds all the properties of a being; the second mistake is to support the idea that several qualities exist by themselves." (Correia 2020: 26) [9].

For Locke, more important than memory was the accountability of having the same consciousness. Hence, the reading of Galen Strawson, according to which:

> It's clear that Consciousness—Lockean consciousness— isn't the same as memory, contrary to what many have supposed. The primary and paradigm case of Consciousness involves no memory at all: it's the Consciousness one has of one's own experience and action in the present, the Consciousness that's "inseparable from thinking" (2011: 72) [10].

As Margaret Atherton rightly points out:

> What he [Locke] is saying is that what makes me different at this moment from any other person is that *my thoughts are identical with my consciousness of them. No one else can have my consciousness, any more than any organism can have my life*. (1983: 28) [11,12].

For Locke, being a person implies more things than having consciousness. To be a person require several criteria:

1. A thinking, intelligent being.
2. Have reason and reflection.
3. Can consider itself as itself.
4. To have personal identity, i.e., to be conscious (Locke 2.27.9).

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