A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF JOHN LOCKE'S CRITERION OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

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The problem of person and personal identity is of permanent interest in philosophy. Traditional as well as modern philosophers embark upon this problem. The fundamental basis of personal identity lies in the philosophy of Plato. Later on, Plato's theory is revived by Rene Descartes. Neither Plato nor Descartes have been able to provide a satisfactory solution of this problem of personal identity. John Locke in modern times tries of provide a suitable definition of what we actually mean by 'person' or the 'same person' and how personal identity could be determined. My endeavor in this paper is to establish that John Locke's definition of 'person' and his criterion of the determination of 'personal identity' is not a satisfactory one. This, I propose to do as follows:

The problem that troubles most is 'how to define a person and how to determine a criterion of the same person? Or in other words, 'how personal identity could be determined?' Plato conceives person as identical with the soul because the soul is pure reason and beholds the world of forms. The body is an impediment of knowledge from which the soul must free itself in order to behold truth in its purity. The copies of pure-form, as they exist in phenomenal world merely incite the rational soul to think. Descartes revives Plato's theory of form as follows: soul is a spiritual substance whose essential attribute is 'thinking' and 'consciousness'.

Descartes states that, there is an attribute that certainly belongs to him and that is nothing but 'mere-thinking', 'cogitatio' which alone cannot be detached from him. He is then precisely 'a thing that thinks' (res cogitans,, chose qui pense). He states, "... if I were not thinking, thus, I would not know where I existed ... and it could even happen ... I stopped thinking I might at the same time cease to be."²

It is evident that there are crucial difficulties inherent in both Plato and Descartes. Therefore, in order to remove the difficulties Locke adopts a metaphysical position in substantial agreement with that which Descartes has organised into a system. Locke states that the world is composed of substances. Substances are the grounds of qualities and acts are of two types, bodies and souls. A body is a material substance whose attributes are extension, solidity or impenetrability and mobility or the power of being moved. Besides material substances there exist spiritual substances or souls. The soul is a rational being. its qualities are thinking or the power of perception and will or the power of setting the body in motion. Thinking is not the essence but the action of the soul. The soul is an immaterial or spiritual substance, analogous to corporeal substance. We frame the ideal of a bodily substance by putting together certain corporeal qualities and supposing a support for them; we frame an idea of soul substance by reflecting upon the operations of our own mind, such as thinking, understanding, willing, knowing and the power of beginning motion - and joining these to a support or bearer. Locks says: "It is plain then that the idea of corporeal substance in matter is as remote from our conceptions and apprehensions as that of spiritual substance or spirit: and therefore, from our not having any notion of the substance of spirit, we can no more conclude its non-existence than we can for the same reason deny the existence of body ..."3

Locke is certain that there is a spiritual being within him that sees and hears than that there is some corporeal body outside him. Moreover, incogitative matter and motion could never produce thought; it is only the self which is conscious and produces thought.

Locke is certain that he is not his body but he is his soul because the soul being *active* has the capacity to move the passive body and being *passive*, in relation to the bodies outside produces changes in the soul; and all our ideas are due to the action of the body on the soul, Indeed, we have a much clearer ideal of the active power of moving in spirit than in body, a thinking thing is more easily conceived than an extended thing. He states, "I know that people whose thoughts are immersed in matter, and have so subjected their minds to their senses, that they seldom reflect on anything beyond them, are apt to say they cannot comprehend a thinking thing; which perhaps is true; but I affirm, when they consider it well, they can no more comprehend an extended thing."⁴

After establishing the dualism between soul and body, Locke endeavors

to identity himself with the self and not with the body. He says, "This being promised, to find wherein personal identity consists, we must consider what person stands for, which, I think is the thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can be considered itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places, which it does only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking and ... consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that makes everyone to be what he calls self, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things, in this alone consists personal identity." It is the self, the same-self which can be extended to any past action or thought, and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that, that action is done by the same self.

The problem that troubles Locke is to determine his own identity on a criterion of the 'same person'. Locke in accordance with what he calls his principle of relativity of identity, tries to identify 'wherein lies personal identity'. and his answer is that, it is consciousness that constitutes personal identity, for example, the same me, the same person, though and despite the passage of time. His argument is that 'consciousness is inseparable thinking. It is by this consciousness that each of us considers himself as himself, as one persisting thinking thing. It is by this consciousness that our different senses and percepts and thoughts and desires at any time belong to one self and accounts the sameness of the self at different times. He says, "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 with this present one that now reflects on it, that, that action was done." 6

In this connection, J. L. Mackie points out that from the above it becomes clear that, there are two views that Locke is plainly rejecting and these are - (i) in distinguishing person from the man and hence the same person from the same man, he is denying that bodily continuity, the persistence of human organism makes personal identity. The same living body with its continuity of animal life constitutes the same man; but not necessarily the same person, and (ii) he denies that to be the same person is to be, or to have, one persisting immaterial spiritual substance (soul). Locke very clearly states that the existence of a spiritual substance does not determine personal identity because (i) if there are soul substances, then presumably these can be reincarnated, and (ii) if the same soul substance carries the alternative sets of conscious thoughts there would be two different persons with one soul.

Locke uses parallel arguments to bring out the irrelevance to the identity of the person of both the living body and the supposed soul substance in the following way. He states: "Could we suppose two distinct incommunicable consciousness acting the same body, the one constantly by day, the other by night ... I ask ... whether the day and the night - man would not be two as distinct persons as Socrates and Plato."

Similarly, "Since we know that an immaterial thinking thing may sometimes part with its past consciousness and be restored to it again - that is, there may be a total but temporary loss of memory - we can imagine in the same soul substance 'these intervals of memory and forgetfulness to take their turns regularly by day and night' and then 'you have two persons with the same immaterial spirit, as such as, in the former instance, two persons with the same body."

And conversely, if we had 'the same consciousness acting by intervals, two distinct bodies. Locke argues that this would be the same person in two different bodies, just as you may have the same man in two different suits of clothes; and this still holds if there are also two distinct immaterial substances. Therefore, personal identity might be 'continued in a succession of several substances'; it might be 'preserved in the change of immaterial substance' ... as animal identity is preserved in the change of material substances"9. Locke is using the analogy of the way in which the same vegetable or animal life is continued despite the metabolic processes that constantly replace the material components of an organism to argue that there could be a sort of spiritual metabolism, the same consciousness being passed on from one soul substance to another. Equally, it might be passed from one body to another: "Should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, either and inform the body of a cobbler as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions. This example is used to drive a wedge between the same man and the same person; no one, Locke thinks, would say that this is the same man as the former prince." 10

J. L. Mackie¹¹ maintains that Locke introduces a method of constructing the puzzle cases. Locke says that the continuity of animal life in one body and a unified manual history or unity of consciousness normally go together, and the presence of a single immaterial soul substance normally accompany these.

Locke has imagined a series of cases in which the identity and diversity of these items, body, consciousness and soul, do not all go together, but are separated and combined in various ways as follows: (i) In examples of the Jekyll - and - Hyde type the same body and the same soul are associated with two separate unity of consciousness, two mental histories not linked by mutual awareness. (ii) In Socrates and the Mayor of Queenborough we may have the same soul but different bodies and disjoint consciousness. (iii) In the prince and the cobbler we have the same soul and the same consciousness successively in two different bodies.

Locke, in the light of the above combinations, claims that in all these various combinations it is plausible to say that we have the same person where and only where we have the same consciousness: the sameness of a living body is neither necessary nor sufficient to constitute the same person, nor is the sameness of a spiritual substance but personal identity is somehow to be equated with or based on the unity of consciousness. He admits that in ordinary way of speaking, the 'same person' and the 'same men' stand for one and the same thing. Locke says that 'person' is 'a forensic term, appropriating actions and their merit'. That is, the sameness of a person is intended to carry with it, legal and moral responsibility for actions; that is why, it 'belongs only to intelligent agents, capable of Law, and happiness and misery'. This personality imputes to itself past actions, just upon the same ground for the same reason that it does the present. All which is founded in a concern for happiness, the unavoidable concomitant of consciousness: "that which is conscious of pleasure and pain desiring that that self that is conscious should be happy." 12

Though Locke introduces a method of constructing puzzle cases, and also proposes a solution of determining 'person' and 'personal identity' yet his solution involves some obscurity and is open to a number serious objections. Many of the objections are stated by A. G. N. Flew. 13 Flew attempts to do three things about Locke's solution of person and personal identity. These could be stated as follows:

- It outlines Locke's contribution to the discussion of the problem of personal identity, that is the philosophical problem of what is meant by the expression 'same person'.
- ii) It attacks Locke's proposed solution, showing that it is quite irreparably wrong.

1

iii) It enquires how Locke is misled into offering this mistaken yet perennially seductive answer.

Flew states that Locke's contribution to be problem of personal identity is four fold. Firstly, he saw the importance of the problem because in his personal identity is founded all the right and justice of reward and punishment. Not only this, all the questions of survival, pre-existence and immortality are questions of personal identity. The question, Is Cesare Borgia still alive, surviving bodily death?" is equivalent to "Is there a person now alive, surviving bodily death, who is the same person as Cesare Borgia?" Thus Locke attempts to find out a criteria of the 'same person'.

Secondly, Locke makes an attempt to appreciate the relevance of the puzzles related with the problem of personal identity. Philosophers maintain that any solution to the problem must be able to do one of two things. *Either* it must consist in some sort of definition or set of rules which will enable us to deal with all possible puzzles either by telling us that same person is or is not correctly applicable, or by hinting to us what further factual information we require before we can know *or* else the solution must explain why the questions raised by the puzzle cases cannot be so definitely answered. Locke himself chooses the first alternative and answers all the puzzles he had invented in the light of his telemanic definition. For instance, he tells us what would decide the puzzle if the man who claimed to have the same soul as Socrates.

Thirdly, Locke maintains that 'same' is systematically ambiguous. It is not, therefore, unity of substance that comprehends all sorts of identity or will determine it in every case, but to conceive and judge of it a right, we must consider what idea the word it is applied to stand for." ¹³ Locke is right at least in so far as he is maintaining that there are special and peculiar problems about 'same' as applied to person.

Forthly, Locke proposes a solution of the problem of personal identity as follows:

It is that X at time₂ is the same person as Y at time₁ if and only if X and Y are both persons and X can remember at time₂ (his doing) what Y did, or felt, or what have you at time₁

Locke's proposed solution in his own words, is that, "That with which the consciousness of this present, and is oneself with it, and with nothing else; and so attributes to itself and owns all the actions of that thing, as its own, as far as that consciousness reaches, and no further as everyone who reflects will perceive." ¹⁴

Flew points out that the word 'consciousness' is not used by Locke very clearly and distinctly. Sometimes it seems to mean self conscious, for instance, - a being that ... can consider itself as itself ... does so only by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking (Essay, 11, XXVII, 11). Sometimes, it seems to be more straight forwardly the consciousness which is the opposite of anaesthetia: for instance, when 'self' is defined as a conscious thinking thing ... which is sensible or conscious of pleasure or pain, capable of happiness and misery ... (Essay 11, XXVII, 17). But in his main statements of his position 'consciousness' is simply equivalent to 'memory' as can be seen from the novels, "could we suppose any spirit wholly stripped of all its memory or consciousness of past actions, as we find our minds always are of a great part of ours, and sometimes of them all" (Essay, 11, XXVII, 25). "In the interests of both clarity and brevity we have used 'remember' instead of 'be conscious of' in our restatements of Locke's central thesis." Besides, there are two lines of attacks taken by Bishop Butler as follows:

- 1) It is self-evident that consciousness of personal identity only presupposes and cannot constitute personal identity as stated by Locke. It is absurd to say that "he is the same person" *Means* that "he can remember that he is the same person," since expressions such as "I remember doing, feeling, seeing something" do not refer explicitly to the fact that what is remembered is that the speaker is the same person as did, felt, or saw whatever it was.
- 2) Locke's criterion is at the same time both too strict in blackballing and too lenient in admitting candidates. Often his definition would not allow us to apply the expression 'same person' where we certainly should think it properly applicable; whereas in other cases Locke's ruling would be that it did apply when we should certainly judge it not correctly applicable.

Two of the Lokean terms are very ambiguous. 'Can' may be either 'can as a matter of fact (hereafter referred to as "can [factual]" or it may be "can without self-contradiction be said to" (hereafter referred as "can [logical]"). There is also a more subtle ambiguity in "remember" which is best brought out by symbolic examples. "I know P" and "he is not lying" does not entail "P". Similarly, "I remember" entails "P", but said that he remembered P, and he

was not lying does not entail "P". For it is possible to be honestly mistaken in making a claim to remember something. When someone challenges a knowledge claim on a memory claim, he does not necessarily or even usually challenge the claimant's integrity. He is much more likely to be merely questioning the truth of the proposition said to be known or remembered. And if the proposition is in fact, false, this is sufficient to defeat the claim really to know or truly to remember. We have therefore to distinguish between *genuine remembering*, which necessarily involves the truth of that proposition said to be remembered and making *honest memory claim*, which does not. It is now possible to bring the changes on these alternative interpretations of 'can' and 'remember' as follows:

- (a) Taking 'can' as logical and 'remember' as entailing the truth of what is remembered, and for it to be a genuine remembering the person remembering must necessarily be the same person as the person whose experience or activity he claims to be remembering as his own. Here what we must say is that this interpretation is an otiose only too truism.
- Taking 'remember' in the same way as referring to genuine remembering and 'can' as can (factual). Here, Locke's definition is open to two objections. Firstly, it excludes too much, for we often and rightly want to say that we must have done something or other though we cannot for the life or remember doing it. We are even prepared to accept full responsibility for such forgotten actions, at any rate provided that, they are important and even if we want to disown or diminish our moral or legal responsibility for them, we are prepared to conclude that we are the same person as did them, unless, mistakenly, we think that personal identity is not merely the necessary but also the sufficient condition of full moral and legal responsibility. Secondly, the second objection to second interpretation is the famous paradox, the case of the Gallant Officer. This objection has been first raised by Berkeley. Later on, it was reproduced by Reid in glorious technicolor, "Suppose a brave officer to have been flogged when a boy at school, for robbing an orchard, to have taken a standard from the enemy in his first champion, and also to have been made a general in advanced life. "Then if the young officer could remember the flogging, and the general could remember taking the standard but not being flogged as a boy, in Locke's principle we have to say that the general both is and is not the same person as the actual robber. He is not the same (because he cannot now remember the robbery), and yet he is the same (because he is the young officer

who was in turn the same as the boy thief.

- (c) The third possibility is to take 'can as can (logical) and 'remember' as involving only the making of an honest memory claim. The objection to this is that it will let too much in. This point too was first raised by Berkeley in the private philosophical commentaries: "wherein consists identity of person? Not in actual consciousness, for then I am not the same person. I was this day twelve month, but while I think of what I then did. Not in potential, for then all persons may be the same, for aught we know. Mem: story of Mr. Deerings aunt. Two sorts of potential consciousness natural and potential, In the last section but one I mean the latter." 16
- (d) The fourth possible combination, that of 'can' as can (factual) with remember as involving only the making of an honest memory claim, yield an interpretation open to all three objections made against the thesis in interpretations two and three. First, it leaves too much out, ignoring amnesia. Second, it lets too much in ignoring paramnesia. It is internally inconsistent, being exposed to the paradox of the case of the Gallant officer.
- 3) Locke insists that the personal identity is preserved when the same consciousness is preserved, whether in the same or different substances. Here, Lock seems to be reasonably but inconsistently, anxious and as F. H. Bradley says "it may help us to perceive, what was evident before, that a self is not thought to be the same because of bare memory, but only so when the memory is considered not to be defective." And Locke's anxiety is inconsistent in the sense that, it is inconsistent with his official account of personal identity, which requires him to deny that there can (logical) be honest but falsidical memory claims, or if "being the same person as did that" means "being a person able to remember (his) doing, or being able to be conscious of (his) doing, that" then you cannot consistently say that a person may both be able to remember his doing and yet not actually have done some particular thing. or, rather, to be absolutely strict, this can be made consistent only by interpreting "remember" to refer exclusively to genuine veridical memory; thus reducing this whole account of personal identity to vacuity.

Flew points out four sources of trouble in Locke's theory of personal identity. These are: (i) Locke is confused about memory, (ii) Locke used consciousness mainly in two ways - (a) consciousness is identical with thinking, and (b) consciousness contradicts complete unconsciousness, and (iii)

consciousness is identical with memory. Locke is confused about the epistemological question 'How can we know, what good evidence can we have for propositions about personal identity?' With the inseparable but not identical enquiry, "what do such propositions mean?" It is the latter which he is supposed to be pursuing. But what he offers would provide a partial answer to the former Neither sort of question can be identified with that to which Locke's main problem belongs: "In this doctrine not only is consciousness confounded with memory but, which is still more strange, personal identity is confounded with the evidence which we have of our personal identity" 18 (iv) Locke defines 'person' as a "thinking intelligent being that ... in different times and places" ignoring the possible danger of circularity which in this task of "the same thinking thing," and the most radical objection here is that this definition misses the ordinary meaning and use of the term 'person'. Flew states that, person does not stand for a spiritual or disembodied entity, but person stands for a physical entity that has size, shape, form and colour. Locke himself admits that his distinction between 'man' (in ordinary sense) and person, the possibility of disembodiment or embodiment, in different bodies, is not made in ordinary language: "I know that, in the ordinary way of speaking, the same person, and the same man stands for one and the same thing," 18 He states that Locke fails to realise how important this admission is and what its implications are. If we use 'person' in a new sense, then we wreck our chances of producing a descriptive analysis of 'same person'. Locke endeavors to differentiate 'what person stands for' with the "same person" with the comment "as every one who reflects will perceive."19

Flew states that Locke's attempt to make a distinction between 'same man' and 'same person' demands investigation. Why does Locke want to do it?

Firstly, the term 'man' refers to physical characteristics and person refers to psychological characteristics (certain nuances of English idiom which suggests a distinction of this kind). Any change in the psychological characteristics is a change of that person. Physical criteria is not enough to determine a person or personal identity (Locke).

Secondly, person is a forensic term, responsible for the right and justice of rewards and punishment (Essay 11, XXVII. 26) but man is not.

Thirdly, Locke's distinction between the man and person is his platonic-Cartesian conviction that persons essentially are incorporeal spirits.

Though the idea of a man involves the body as well, the essential *person* is the thinking self which is not necessarily of human shape or even corporeal (*Essay*, 11, XXXII, 10 italics original), and again *man* applies to an idea in which body and shape are included. Locke's first concern is to prove that there is *something* in us which has the power to think. Flew refutes this view by stating that "we sometimes think" does not entail "something in us which has the power to think"

Forthly, for Locke personal identity is necessarily important for his deeds would be accountable on the "Great Day". But this necessary condition can never be fulfilled because on the 'Great Day' the person must be dead and buried and it is not possible for an indistinguishable person to stand for his trial. Locke misstated his thesis when he says "one thing cannot have two beginnings of existence, nor two things one beginning That, therefore that had one beginning, is the same thing; and that which had a different beginnings in time and place from that, is not the same, but diverse." ²⁰

Besides these difficulties, there are some other difficulties prominent in Locke's theory of person. There are (a) Unknowingly Locke has formulated the theory of immortality. (b) Locke states that memory could be the criteria of determining personal identity, but we have seen that this cannot be true because , there is the possibility of having false memory claim. (c) Locke has entered into a topic too vast and too difficult for a single explorer to open up immediately. (d) Locke had to struggle to his insights through a rank growth of baffling terms, such as 'immaterial substance', 'selves', 'thinking subsistence', 'rational souls' etc. (e) Locke, propounds the un-Lokean assumption that we have a definition that will provide all relevant factual data about all actual or imaginable case whether or not the expression 'same person' can correctly be applied. But this assumption is mistaken and vague and Wisemann states that it is not possible to define person because such an endeavor is what is meant as 'open texture', he says: "it is this open texture much more than any actual vagueness in use which prevents the definition of person,"21 or again, "Locke revealed what he did not himself see, that it is not possible to define the meaning of 'same person' descriptively and at the same time give a definition which will answer all possible problems of application ... it is not possible to produce even a prescriptive definition which will give absolute security against all possibility of surprise and indecision."22

Locke fails to provide a definition or a criteria of the 'same person'. Locke's plausible suggestion is that the sameness of a person is based somehow on co-consciousness of experiences and actions. But this suggestion is damaging for the following reason. I quote:

Since a man at t_2 commonly remembers only some of his experiences and actions at t_1 whereas, what constituted a person at t_1 was all the experiences and actions that were co-conscious, Locke's view fails to equate a person identical at t_2 with any person identifiable at t_1 . It is only a theory of how some items which belonged to a person identifiable at t_1 are appropriated by a person who can be identified as such only t_2 . It is therefore hardly a theory. If personal identity at all, but might be better described as a theory of action appropriation. Locke might be forgetting that 'person' is not only 'a forensic term, appropriating action and their merit,' but also the noun corresponding to all the personal pronouns²³.

Therefore, all the attempts to define the 'same person' fails. Locke's control thesis is wrong and the sources of his mistakes, Flew states, could be summarised as follows. First, a series of confusions about memory. Second, his muddled and slippery use of the term 'consciousness'. Third, the failure rigidly to distinguish the meaning of statements from, what is inseparably connected with it, their methods of verifications; Fourth, the view that 'person' refers, same bodiless and intelligible inhabitant of the dark room of the understanding (Essay, 11, XI, 17) rather than to people like those in everyday life; and fifth, the assumption that there is some real essence of personal identity, that it is possible to produce a definition which can guard us against every threat of future linguistic indecision.

Locke's attempt to identify person with 'his action' and the 'merits and demerits of his action' has given a new direction in our inquiry about 'who actually is the person?' Though there are defects and inaccuracies in his theory of person, this theory has given birth to another theory known as the 'Unitary Concept of Person'.²⁴

NOTES

- 1. Plato, Phaedo form The Dialogues of Plato, by B. Jowett, p. 464.
- 2. Quoted in B. Williams, Descartes, the Project of Inquiry, X 521, HRI, 322.

- John Locke, Essay concerning Human Understanding, ed. by A. C. Fraser, 1894.
 Oxford. Ch. XXIII.
- 4. Ibid.
- Ibid. Ch. XXVII.
- Ibid.
- Ibid. XXVII. 23. Cf. 11.i. 11. 12.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9. Ibid. XXVII, 23.19, 12.
- 10. Ibid XXVII 15
- 11. J. L. Mackie, The Problems from Locke. Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1976. p. 176.
- 12. John Locke, op. cit., ". XXVII, Cf. 11.i.11.
- 13. Anthony Flew, 'Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity', Quoted in *Locke and Berkeley* edited by C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong, p. 155.
- 14. John Locke, op. cit. 11, XXVII. 17, Italics original.
- Essay on the Intellectual Powers of Man, ed. A. D. Woozley London, 1941, III,
 6.
- Works, ed. A. A. Luce and T. E. Jossop, Edinburgh, 1948-57, Vol. I, p. 26. Entries 200-2.
- 17. F. H. Bradley, Appearance and Reality, London and New York, 1893, p. 85.
- Reid, quoted in 'Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity,' by Anthoy Flew. from Locke and Berkeley, edited by C. B. Martin and D. M. Armstrong, p. 166.
- 19. John Locke, *Essay*, 11, XXVIII, 11 and 17.
- 20. John Locke, Essay, 11, XXVII, 1.
- 21. C. B. Martin and d. M. Armstrong, op. cit., p. 175.
- 22. Ibid., p. 176.
- 23. J. L. Mackie. op. cit., p. 183.
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