

The Necessity of Memory for Self-identity: Locke, Hume, Freud and the Cyber-self

by
Shane Ralston

John Locke is often understood as the inaugurator of the modern discussion of personal human identity—a discussion that inevitably falls back on his own theory with its critical reliance on **memory**. David Hume and Sigmund Freud would later make arguments for what constituted personal identity, both relying, like Locke, on **memory**, but parting from Locke's company in respect the role that **memory** played. The purpose of this paper will be to sketch the groundwork for Locke's own theory of personal identity and consider some common objections tied to his special reliance on **memory**. Then, we will investigate the extent to which Hume and Freud refined their respective concepts of **self-identity** in ways that escape some of the most intractable objections to Locke's theory in its dependence on **memory**. Finally, we will consider which theorist's conception of **self-identity** best accords with our notion of the cyber-self, or psychological subjectivity in the context of cyberspace.

For Locke, the nature of **self-identity** is that it is continuous across time, and to remain uninterrupted it must be beholden to a psychological process, rather than a material or immaterial substance. First of all, Locke answers the query 'what does a person represent' by reference to this attribute of diachronic persistency: "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places." {Locke, 448} Although Locke's employment of the language, "thinking thing" and "reason," might seem to allude to Descartes' "thing which thinks," *res cogitans*, it is actually diametrically opposed in the following way. While Descartes grasped the human self as thinking, or immaterial, substance, Locke, on the other hand, understood the self as constituted by a mental process of reflecting on, or being conscious of, the sensations and thoughts. These sensations and thoughts flow not only through the subject at this time, but also the subject at previous times, so that identity is constituted by realizing that the subject past and present are the same. Locke says: "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 as it was then; and 'tis by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that action was done." {Locke, 449}

In taking this position, Locke clearly rejects two positions: (1) that, as he says, the Man and the Person are equivalent, meaning that continuity of body does not secure **self-identity** and (2) that some immaterial substance, such as the soul, defines the essence of personal identity, allowing two bodies with the same transmigrated soul to be the same person. His tactic in (2) is not to deny the existence of an immaterial substance, or soul, (for all he knows, one could exist) but to instead affirm that if the adoption of a new consciousness through transmigration of the soul would detach the subject of the present and the one in the previous **memory**, then two persons would result: the person of the previous consciousness and the person of the newfound consciousness. Several other puzzles result from this substance and consciousness dichotomy, where continuity of consciousness preserves identity: Can an immaterial, thinking, substance be separated from its consciousness of the past? If a person loses all **memory** of his past is he still the same person? If not, does he regain his personal identity once he recovers his **memory**? The answers all rely on the connection of personal identity to consciousness, a connection established by the **necessity** of **memory**, or the setting aside of past actions in order to confirm the continuity of identity between the past self and the present self. If you will, **memory** is much like a glue which binds personal identity to consciousness so that that the one extends only so far as the other.

Many of the objections to Locke's theory of identity specifically prosecute the necessary element of **memory** in making personal identity rely on continuity of consciousness. Let us begin with a more practical objection. Since we know that identity of material or immaterial substance is neither a necessary nor sufficient condition to conclude that we have sameness of person, then we are left to ask what are the practical ramifications of this definition of personhood, for instance, in the case of a drunk person who harms another while unconscious? Locke in fact says that in issues of law, the inconclusiveness of evidence for demonstrating the presence or absence of consciousness makes its application impractical, though God will judge everyone in the light of his conscious decisions. {Locke, 457}

Next, there is the amnesia objection: If a person cannot remember certain past actions or thoughts, then are they are no longer part of his identity. Locke says, in short, that while the man is the same, the person is different. {Locke, 452} How should we interpret this? One way is to understand **memory** as a completeness concept where all elements must be retained in **memory** in order to sustain continuity. This, however, seems to impose an intolerable burden on the subject, in which we know **memory** is fallible in the sense that it is often lost, reformulated and sometimes recovered in fragmentary form. Another option would be to utilize a coherence concept of **memory** whereby a certain threshold of memories allows us to construct a narrative and maintain continuity from our past to our present self. J.L. Mackie has suggested a similar approach in which we can understand **memory** as a collection of co-consciousnesses, or strings of faint fragments of **memory**, which has two benefits: (1) It avoids the circularity of Locke's reasoning in speaking of consciousness as a noun, both as a unified entity and as a diversity of separate conscious experiences. And (2) it joins Locke's concept of identity to Hume's concept that involves a procession of perceptions held together by relations in **memory**. {Mackie, 178} Still another adventurous recommendation by Winkler is to treat **memory** as a method of appropriation and the self as contingent on what it appropriates. As Winkler notes, "If I cannot remember certain past thoughts or actions, then they are not part of my self...I am not concerned about them. I have not appropriated them." Winkler's approach will also help to counter some of the later objections regarding transitivity. {Winkler, 153}

We also find that the objection of circularity in Locke's reasoning surfaces when he defines personal identity in a way that presupposes a more foundational idea of identity, or a first-person subjectivity that is conscious of itself as distinct from others. Besides diachronic personal identity, or identity over time, we must also consider synchronic personal identity, or identity of a person at a specific time, such as when someone has a thought and acts at the same time. In talking of diachronic personal identity, Locke seems to assume that the person realizes that he is a distinct entity from any other person, that if he has a simultaneous thought and action then they are both his own and that his memories must therefore be his own. Otherwise, Locke's person might display the symptoms of a split-brain patient whereby thought and action do not occur in concert and therefore the mapping of thought to action in **memory** is temporally disrupted and sometimes mistakenly ascribed to other agents.

The transitivity objection to Locke's theory of identity concentrates on the conflict of the diachronic explanation of identity with the actual logical properties of identity relation. Of the three possible forms of identity relation, reflexive, symmetrical and transitive, the one that is most troublesome to the **necessity** of **memory** in the connection between identity and consciousness is the transitive. Thomas Reid posed the transitive objection in a rather creative story: An army general recalls a brave action he had done during war as a junior officer, while the junior officer remembers stealing apples as a boy and getting beaten for it, yet the general has no recollection of the apple-stealing and the resultant beating. {Lowe, 112} Is the general the same person as the boy who stole the apples? According to Locke's theory of identity, it would seem the answer would be 'no,' even though the general is the same person as the junior officer and the junior officer the same as the boy, which is in direct opposition to the logical law of transitivity (If A=B, B=C then A=C). One way recommended by E.J. Lowe to alter Locke's theory in order to accommodate the demands of transitivity is to qualify the no-transitivity with an ancestral provision: i.e. "in order for x to stand in the ancestral of the **memory** relation to y, it suffices that x remembers the deeds of someone who remembers the deeds of someone who" and so on through a finite series of relations. {Lowe, 111} This tactic parallels Mackie's suggestion of comprehending **memory** in Locke as a series of co-consciousnesses yet it also suffers as a revision which Locke would be unlikely to accept. Regardless of the lack of transitivity that this entails, Locke seems dedicated to the position that if someone cannot remember a past act or thought of a person, then that someone is not the same person as the one who acted and thought.

As was alluded to earlier, Hume's theory of personal identity seems much closer to Mackie's modification of Locke's theory as a series of co-consciousnesses, and even Lowe's version with the ancestral provision. Hume's concept of personal identity expressly avoids the problem of transitivity by describing it as "a succession of perceptions" to which **memory** introduces us to the relations between. {Hume, 239} For Hume, the critical relation that **memory** makes us aware of is that of causality, whereas "having once acquired this notion of causation from the **memory**, we can extend the same chain of causes, and consequently the identity of our persons beyond our **memory**, and can comprehend times, and circumstances, and actions, which we have entirely forgot, but suppose in general to have existed." {Hume, 247}

Although Locke overestimates the power of **memory** to preserve personal identity, Hume is more circumspect, granting that our **memory** is often bereft of any recollection of particular actions on particular dates, so that the obvious strategy would be to reconstruct through our understanding of causation a narrative around those events which we do recollect. Hume therefore improves on Locke's theory, in what I have earlier labeled a coherence theory of **memory**, and even goes so far as to challenge the Lockean "who affirm that **memory** produces entirely our personal identity, to give a reason why we can thus extend our identity beyond our **memory**." {Hume, 248} But what makes Hume's theory stronger than Locke's also casts doubt on it: namely, that reconstructing a narrative around those events we recollect and imposing causative links leads to embellishment, or adding information to the truth, and therefore the generation of falsehoods. Despite St. Augustine's claim that when something occurs it generates a corresponding truth, with identity in Hume the corresponding truth is buried beneath a muddle of prolific, and often misleading, layers of reconstruction.

Modern psychology, and especially Freud's theory of psychoanalysis, tends to shed light on this relation between **memory** and reconstruction as elements in the production of personal identity. Freud postulated that underlying psychological forces in a person's unconscious mind, latent and repressed by the conscious mind, serve to determine a person's behavior. This takes place in the relation between the Id, the instinctive and pleasure-seeking impulses of the unconscious, and the Ego, the reasoning and social center of the conscious mind, in which the latter tries to subdue the former so that unacceptable memories do not arrive in the conscious mind. {Freud, 295} Forgetting, or amnesia, is a central facet of Freud's concept of **self-identity**, a function of the Ego in its repression of the Id, such that **memory** can more easily be defined as "forgetting to forget." {Eagleton}

According to Freud, the Ego reconstructs the narrative of its **memory** in much the way that Hume postulated, but the truth of every person's real **memory** may lie dormant and repressed in the Id, bound to resurface when the person least expects. While Locke's theory of identity relies on continuous consciousness, or awareness of the identity of the present self with the self in our memories, Freud's concept of identity holds that persons are only aware of fragmentary pieces of **memory** selected by the Ego for reconstruction of an acceptable narrative and the remainder is repressed, influencing identity without the person's conscious awareness. Under Freud's theory, **memory** is episodic, rather than continuous, so that especially powerful or traumatic experiences in our memories may be repressed but still influence us on an unconscious level. An example would be the repressed memories of childhood abuse which arrive in the conscious mind years later due to some unknown catalyst, one which Freud would say has allowed the Id to bypass the Ego. {Freud, 232} Though such memories might be first interpreted as wholesale evidence of actual abuse, they can just as well be evidence of fantasies and desires, rather than true recollections.

The final issue we face is whether a conception of the cyber-self must rely on **memory**, and if so, to which theorist's model—Locke, Hume or Freud's—would it best accord. We could easily imagine a person who accesses on-line discussion groups and participates in IRC (Internet Relay Chat) on a regular basis, but forgets the time and content of past sessions. Likewise, we can recognize the possibility that some people may either have a fragmentarily incomplete **memory** of past sessions while others will have thoroughly complete recollection of all past sessions. With the aid of computer technology we can attain an exhaustive **memory** since all sessions may be recorded and our own personal **memory** thereby confirmed by reference to a complete record. What difference does **memory** make in understanding the diachronic identity of a person across multiple sessions? In order to maintain consistency of identity from one session to the next, it may be thought necessary, as Locke did, to adopt a completeness principle of identity, viz. to be able to identify the self of the present session with all selves in prior sessions. Yet it seems hardly necessary that a person would have to recall all previous sessions in order to appreciate his or her own cyber-identity as persistent throughout all sessions. According to Hume's theory of identity, in fact, the user would only need to recall some of the past sessions and connect them together via a loose causal chain in order to create the semblance of a singular unified self. In order for the user to avoid the possibility that others might confuse her on-line identity, then, it would be sufficient to communicate to them some incident within a previous recollected session. And to skirt around any obfuscation of changing screen names, the user can maintain the same screen name or identify herself by reference to a previous screen name. In other words, the task of maintaining a consistent identity in cyberspace resembles the same task in ordinary space with a few minor technological qualifications. **Memory** is necessary for this task, but by no means must it be entirely exhaustive of the user's history in cyberspace. Therefore, Hume's coherence model of identity seems to accord best with the cyber-self understood as a consistent personal identity which persists across sessions and screen names.

The theme that is often stressed in discussing on-line identities, though, is the liberty an individual has, and often exercises, to adopt a different representation of herself than her ordinary identity. Turkle calls this aspect of on-line identity that challenges the unitary idea of self the "fluid decentered self." {Turkle, 8} When partaking in an IRC session, persons may adopt various screen names and with them dissimilar character roles. However, it is not the change of screen name which qualifies the behavior in the session as an identity transformation; instead, it is, vice-versa, the changed behavior during the session which qualifies any screen name change as an identity transformation. Indeed, since multiple persons may utilize the same screen name, we can even entertain an identity transformation by one person utilizing the same screen name. Assuming the user kept perfect record of his sessions, Locke's theory would only allow for a formally persistent recollection of previous identity. It, however, would not explain the substantive inconsistency of the self from one manifestation to the next. Hume's theory, on the other hand, would not afford the user much utility in trying to form causal links between the various characters, since each would seem new and distinct from the user's ordinary identity. These links might be formed by reference to the separate ideas that constituted each decision to transform, assuming that each idea and its relation were preserved in **memory**. Could the phenomena of adopting multiple representations of the self in cyberspace confirm that there are actually multiple selves within each user? To the contrary, adopting the position that there are heterogeneous selves in one body would seem disagreeable with our own intuitive experiences of ourselves, which confirm that the constitution of the self is instead quite homogeneous, flexible and, as Turkle refers to it, 'fluid.' {Turkle, 8} To fend off the former question from arising, then, it may be fair to state that it is too presumptuous to assert that the self is always newly altered by these transformations, i.e. that it adopts new character identities entirely divorced from the core, or ordinary, one. An alternative would be to conceive identity as a constitutive amalgam of minor identities or, as Bobbie Johal describes it, "two separate and distinct temporary identities comprising a combined, or master identity." {Johal}

In the light of Freud's theory of identity, these incidences of transformation could be identified as manifestations of the unconscious Id in the conscious world via the emancipating medium of IRC. While the Ego would normally repress these unwanted expressions in the ordinary world, it fails to do so in the world of cyberspace simply because it is afforded anonymity and autonomy from the standard mechanisms of censure. Turkle has noted that this does not lead to the disorder of dissociative identity disorder, in which a person maintains separate identities unbeknownst to the others. Furthermore, it could be argued that IRC actually has a therapeutic effect in relieving certain forms of dissociative amnesia, whereby memories previously repressed and forgotten may be exposed to the conscious mind. Alternatively, though, it is just as likely, all things being equal, that the multiple roles played in IRC could be an expression of unconscious fantasies, rather than repressed memories. Regardless of the manifold possible interpretations, it is evident that in appreciating the cyber-self as an enigma of varying representations, the best theory, among the three, would likely be Freud's.

To conclude, although Freud's theory seems completely antithetical to Locke's theory, it can actually be understood as a further refinement, one which builds on the improvements made by Hume on Locke's concept of identity, and allows us to better understand the nature of the cyber-self. Whereas Locke relies on completeness theory of **memory** to explain how identity is linked to consciousness, a theory far too optimistic with regards to the capabilities of human **memory**, Hume unequivocally refines Locke's approach by utilizing **memory** in only a limited sense. He accomplishes this by introducing the causal relation between a procession of perceptions as the basis for the reconstruction of a coherent narrative. Furthermore, Freud informs us of the significance of the conscious mind in actually repressing **memory**; hence, our identity simultaneously grows out of the influences of both the unconscious, or Id-like, factors and conscious, or Ego-like, factors in our minds. While Locke's definition of identity seems to be the most veridical, or truth-preserving, just by the nature of it having to rely on a completely exhaustive **memory**, Hume's sense of identity is less veridical due to its appeal to reconstruction, which is an invitation for embellishment and distortion. Freud, of all three, seems to be the most ambiguous in regards to the identity-truth relation, as identity could either be reconstructed as a falsehood to hide a repressed **memory** or be emancipated truth from repressed actual memories. In the context of cyberspace, Hume's theory seems to accord best with a desire to preserve a consistent identity across IRC sessions and time, whereas Freud's seems to rationalize the singularity of the cyber-self amidst multiple representations in the IRC forum. Regardless, the common element in all the three theories is their reference to psychological subjectivity or, in other words, to a subject who can distinguish himself from others and identify his present self with his past by reference to **memory**. What the medium of cyberspace demands is that we alter our conception of **memory** as internal to the human mind and extend it to the technology and to the community of fellow cyber-selves, both of which are capable of affirming

our cyber-identities. Our cyber-selves may then be understood as something more than a substantial ego or a conscious process, as philosophers traditionally conceive personal identity; instead, they might even be constituted by our accumulated history in cyberspace.

-

References

Eagleton, lecture given at Oxford University, 4/27/99.

Freud, Sigmund, Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis, London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd., 1921.

Hume, David, The Treatise of Human Nature, vol. 1, London: Everyman's Library, 1951.

Johal, Bobbie, "All the World's a Stage," Cyber Philosophy Journal, Issue no.1.

Locke, John, Essay Concerning Human Understanding, vol. 1, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1894.

Lowe, E.J., Locke on Human Understanding, London: Routledge, 1971.

Mackie, J.L., Problems from Locke, Oxford: Clarendon, 1976.

Turkle, Sherry, Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet, Boston: McGraw-Hill Inc., 1998.

Winkler, Kenneth P., "Locke on Personal Identity," reprinted in Locke, edited by Vere Chappell, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988.

Biography

The author, **Shane Ralston**, is a graduate student at California State University, Los Angeles, pursuing an MA in philosophy. His undergraduate degree is from University of California, Santa Cruz, in legal studies and philosophy. This paper was written while he was studying abroad for the spring term 1999 at Magdalen College, Oxford University, in England.