

Diachronic Personal Identity

Lindsey Tavares

Introduction

In this paper, I will compare two arguments- one made by John Locke in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, and one made by David Hume in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Locke and Hume both considered the question of how personal identity (sameness of a person) persists over time (is diachronic). Both were empiricists who believed that the self is not a substance. Both supported a psychological idea of the self. While Locke argued that a person needs continuity of consciousness through memory to be the same person over time, Hume did not agree. Hume thought memory has gaps and is not necessary for diachronic personal identity. I believe that if personhood is to be understood psychologically, the theory utilized to determine personhood must be compatible with the findings of modern psychology. My thesis is Hume's bundle theory might be compatible with modern day psychology in a way that Locke's continuity of consciousness view is not. I will argue this point and challenge Locke's claim by providing three issues with the second premise of his argument. I will include potential responses to these issues as well as my own thoughts.

Empiricist Framework and Rejection of the Substance View

In order to compare Locke and Hume's arguments, I will first consider the view the two philosophers are arguing against and the framework they are arguing within. The substance view holds that one's identity is based upon a single and continuous idea/substance (like a soul, thinking thing, body, etc.). The continuousness of the idea/substance is necessary for a substance view, meaning that the substance view would not work if the idea/substance was not continuous

(because then the person's identity would not be sustained over time). Hume and Locke were empiricists who believed all knowledge traces back to experience. They would agree that personhood is not a single substance, challenging the substance view. The following is Hume's argument against the substance view:

(P1) If a person is a single and continuous idea, then they must be rooted in a single and continuous impression.

(P2) A person is not rooted in only a single impression.

(C) A person is not a single and continuous idea.

Hume's challenge to the substance view is strong, it takes the form of modus tollens by negating the consequent. His argument is valid. Yet, one could claim it ultimately relies on an empiricist framework because the first premise of the argument would rely on an unstated premise that ideas come from impressions/experiences. If one accepts the first premise as true, it would be incompatible to stay rooted in a single impression/experience (such that the self must be from one impression, but the self cannot be from one impression). Support for premise two would be that "there is no impression constant and invariable" (T 1.4.6.2). For example, if I pricked my finger, the pain would subside eventually. Another example would be that I would be unaware of my thoughts when I am deeply asleep. Hume argues that the idea of self cannot be rooted in any single impression or experience. Therefore, a person would not be a single and continuous idea. The question would remain for empiricists like Locke and Hume: if personhood is not a substance, how is a person the same person over time?

Locke's Continuity of Consciousness View

Locke's continuity of consciousness view rests on the idea that person, man, and substance are all different things (Locke, 353). In order to understand his argument, these terms need to be defined. Locke's focus is on personhood, which refers to one's psychology (one's self-awareness); man refers to one's biology- one's physical body and perhaps even genetics (Locke, 352). The question Locke is trying to answer must be framed as whether a person stays the same person over time. As mentioned, a benefit to Locke's view is that the identity of a person would not be the sameness of spiritual or material substance- such as the soul or the body (Locke, 355). There would be no question of personal identity with substance swapping. For instance, if two individuals swapped bodies, the question would not be of identity for Locke because body is separate from consciousness (personhood). Personal identity would relate to one's consciousness, not any substance. Further, differentiation between man and person would prevent issues of whether someone is the same man but different person (Locke, 358). The famous example would be the case of Jekyll and Hyde, though one could also use the example of someone with dissociative identity disorder (formerly known as multiple personality disorder). These examples would show that two (or more) discontinuous persons could live in one body. Given these points, the following argument is Locke's continuity of consciousness view (simplified):

(P1) To be a person, one must meet the requirements of personhood. Foremost of the requirements is to be self-aware (conscious)

(P2) To be the same person over time, one must sustain the requirements of personhood over time (have continuity of consciousness).

(C) Therefore, in order to sustain personhood over time, continued self-awareness (continuity of consciousness) is necessary and sufficient.

The argument relies on the underlying idea that substance is not necessary or sufficient for sustained identity (Locke, 359). The conclusion is that personhood would be sustained over time if and only if continuity of consciousness is maintained. For Locke, memory plays a key role in the continuity of consciousness. Memory threads together the pieces and fills in the gaps, allowing us to retain who we are over time. As such, memory is needed to have continuity of consciousness (Locke, 360).

Hume's Bundle Theory View

Hume, like Locke, asserts that the self is not a substance and also encounters the question of how a person could stay the same person over time. Hume believed in a psychological notion of a person; he thought a person's identity is rooted in their perceptions and judgments. He likens personhood to a "bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with inconceivable rapidity and are in perpetual flux and movement" (T. 1.4.6.3). For Hume, one's mind functions much like a theater in that it involves change (different sets, acts, and characters) yet is understood to be the same play throughout (T 1.4.6.4). Unlike a theatre, one's identity cannot be located exactly or understood materially. Hume thought that the identity of a person functions similarly to the identity of plants and animals (T 1.4.6.5). An example would be if changes take place slowly over time (unnoticeably), then that would preserve identity in our judgments and perceptions. Such that although my cat would age over time, I would not notice if I saw her on a regular basis. Another example would be if the change was expected to occur, the change would not alter identity because the change would not come as a surprise or disrupt the

understanding. Such as a river rapidly changing but doing so constantly. These approaches apply to humans as well. For example, when we see a family member every day, it becomes hard to discern the minute changes they undergo as time passes.

Hume believed that for the identity of a person to be sustained over time, two key principles work together: resemblance and causation. Resemblance involves memory, whose role is to gather and repeat ideas of impressions previously experienced (T 1.4.6.18). This means that routines (everyday actions/experiences) shape one's understanding of life and in turn help to reinforce identity- such that ideas resemble original experiences when they are recalled. Memory acts as a catalyst in discovering personhood. So, as Locke does, it becomes plausible to conclude that it is the source of personal identity. One would claim memory is the source of identity because without memory, one wouldn't be able to discern the causal connection between events. However, after discovering the link through memory, one can extend their understanding of the causal chain and can view personhood beyond the limit of memory, such that they "can comprehend times...which we have entirely forgot but suppose in general to have existed" (T 1.4.6.20). For example, the task is extremely challenging for most people to recall what actions they performed weeks ago (such as their thoughts on their meals or when they tied their shoes each day). Yet, those perceptions and judgments make up who we are. Essentially, for Hume, memory acts as a first step in establishing a causal connection of our understanding of ourselves- memory would discover not produce identity.

The second of the two principles fundamental for the identity of persons is causation. Causation is a principle wherein some thoughts produce other thoughts (T 1.4.6.19). An example would be if a person looks outside and sees leaves falling and concludes that it is autumn, and that they need to rake their leaves and that leads to the thought that they need to do other chores

(and so on). The person who thought of the leaves would be the same person who thought of doing other chores because of the causal link between the ideas. A person is a chain of causally related mental events (like ideas and impressions). According to Hume, that which best exemplifies a person is a city/republic. He states that he “cannot compare the soul more properly to any thing than to a republic or commonwealth” (T 1.4.6.19). This is so because a city has many facets- all of which are constantly changing- yet they are causally connected. For example, a republic may change its rules or leadership; similarly, a person may modify their judgments and beliefs. The causal connection would allow for identity to be sustained over time.

My Thoughts: Evaluating the Views Using Modern Cognitive Psychology

My view is that if diachronic personal identity is to be understood psychologically, then then the underlying philosophy must be compatible with widely agreed upon and tested advances of modern psychology- such as the existence of unconscious processing. Theory and practice must align. In order to evaluate Locke’s argument, I will challenge his second premise that in order to be the same person over time, one must sustain the requirements of personhood over time (have continuity of consciousness) by finding examples of sustained personhood without continuity of consciousness. I will do so in three ways.

First, I will explore the limit of memory, which according to Locke is needed for continuity of consciousness. Memory can be limited by diseases (like dementia), age (memory weakens over time), substance (like alcohol), and more. The limit of memory not only poses forensic or ethical issues of responsibility (such as legally whether it makes sense to charge someone for a crime they do not remember committing), but the limit would also have implications for identity itself. However, Locke could challenge my first point by mentioning that memory might produce continuity in a way that is transitive- even if A cannot connect to C

easily, they would be continuous if they both connect to B. Memory may have its limits, but it would be continuous overall. For example, while a person might not remember tying their shoes yesterday morning, they might remember how that event ties together in the bigger picture of their life. Such that, while tying their shoes, the person remembered an event which they still remember. Memory functioning as a transitive relation would be more in line with Hume's idea of resemblance and cause-and-effect. Yet, Locke did indicate that there is a potential ethical issue with punishing someone for a crime they do not remember committing which would indicate that he would not hold that continuity is a transitive relation (Locke, 358). This would mean memory gaps would pose an issue for Locke but not for Hume.

Secondly, there are times when one has memory but is not conscious of it. According to modern cognitive psychology, in "priming experiments", it has been demonstrated that memory can occur without being aware of it. An example of a priming experiment would be one in which "the activation of memories outside of awareness subsequently influences conscious recall and judgment" (Cramer, 639). This would generate a contradiction for Locke because he believed that one needs to be aware of their memories. Locke is very against the idea of unconscious mental states. He rejected the possibility of memories outside of awareness- he claimed that "it is impossible to make personal identity consist in anything but consciousness; or reach any further than that does" (Locke, 358). He could argue that not all memory is involved in the continuity of consciousness- that memory which we are not aware of is separate. However, memory that occurs outside of our awareness aids in the continuity of consciousness. This may be an unforeseen issue that Locke did not account for. As for Hume, he could say in response to the existence of unconscious memory that the priming of the unconscious memory leads to resemblance, which in turn establishes causation. Rather than resemblance being the true first

step in the process, unconscious priming would be the catalyst. Hume might make a distinction between resemblance and unconscious memory in that resemblance involves being aware of past events in order to establish causal connections between the past and present. Whereas unconscious memory is processing of past events to create an awareness and establish resemblance. This may benefit Hume's causal view because the chain would not have to be fully conscious; experiences could happen outside of awareness yet still affect our identity.

Lastly, there are aspects of personhood which one is not aware of. This would be exemplified by the existence of unconscious processing. The existence of an unconscious mind, which plays a role in memory, learning, and decision-making, and more would contradict Locke's view that the person must have continuous consciousness. Though he could reply that the aspects outside of awareness are not related to being a person by virtue of their definition as existing outside of awareness. Yet, this seems limiting for Locke because their function is key for the bigger picture of the person. Hume's view, on the other hand, could allow for these aspects of personhood to work within his causal theory because he accepted the flaws memory has. He could argue that a person (which is best exemplified as a city) may not be fully aware of all the parts of themselves, yet those parts are causally connected to other parts- all of which shape and impact the bigger picture of who the person is. It is the causal connection which would tie together one's perceptions and judgments where gaps exist. This would mean that, for Hume, a person doesn't need to be completely conscious of every aspect of themselves in order to sustain personhood. His bundle theory may be compatible with modern psychology.

Conclusion

Both Locke and Hume were empiricists, thought that the self is not a substance, and believed in a psychological idea of the self. Locke thought continuity of consciousness through memory was necessary and sufficient for personhood. However, Hume saw memory through resemblance as a kind of first step in establishing one's understanding of oneself. He believed causation can go beyond resemblance in sustaining personhood over time. Over the years, there have been several key updates in modern psychology: one of which being establishing proof for an unconscious mind through experiments and research. In this paper, I argue that if the self is to be understood psychologically (as both Hume and Locke do) then it must coincide with the findings of modern psychology. In light of the information provided, it seems that a modern psychological understanding of the self is not compatible with Locke's continuity of consciousness view. Hume's bundle theory view of the self could be compatible with the findings of modern psychology. If the self is like a city with many changing parts as Hume states, some of the causally connected parts could exist outside of our consciousness.

Works Cited

- Cramer, Phebe. "Defense Mechanisms in Psychology Today." *American Psychologist*, PubMed, July 2000, www.researchgate.net/profile/Phebe-Cramer/publication/12427376_Defense_Mechanisms_in_Psychology_Today_Further_Processes_for_Adaptation/links/568bf74d08ae8445f58dc804/Defense-Mechanisms-in-Psychology-Today-Further-Processes-for-Adaptation.pdf.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Ed. David Fate Norton and Mary J. Norton. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- Locke, John. *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. In *Early Modern Philosophy: An Anthology* ed. By Lisa Shapiro and Marcy P. Lascano. Broadview Press, 2022. pp. 292361