THE CONCEPT OF PERSONAL IDENTITY: A JOURNEY FROM JOHN LOCKE TO THOMAS REID

C. Anjaneyulu
PhD Research Scholar, Department of Philosophy, University of Hyderabad, Gachibowli, Hyderabad-500046, Telangana, India.

Received: July 03, 2018 Accepted: August 08, 2018

ABSTRACT In the history of philosophy, the concept of personal identity has been continuing as a fresh problem from the period of the seventeenth century to till today. The problem is that what gives the identity of a person over time. In other words, what makes a person at time t1 and the person at time t2 as the same person? Traditionally, there was a strong belief that soul makes a person at different times as the same person since it is simple and identical. But, an empiricist philosopher John Locke gives a new kind of theory that consciousness (memory) constitutes personal identity instead of substantial (soul) identity. Locke's this radical step helped as a boost to the materialist philosophers and at the same timethis stepcauses to make a few philosophers to strongly defend the existence of metaphysical substance or soul. In this paper, I would like to examine four noteworthy philosophers' account of personal identity. Those philosophers are John Locke, Leibniz, Joseph Butler, and Thomas Reid.

Keywords: metaphysical substance or soul, consciousness, identity, and personal identity.

1. Introduction
In the history of philosophy, there are some fundamental problems which have been still continuing as newborn babies. The problems such as the existence of God, of the external world, and of soul's immateriality etc., are generally philosophers consider as the fundamental problems. In the modern period of time, there was another problem raised in philosophy that what gives the identity of a person over time. So to speak, what makes a person at time t1 and the person at time t2 as the same person? With this question, we can divide philosophy as before Locke and after Locke since Locke was the person who introduced this problem. Before Locke, there was a general opinion that the soul is immaterial and it continues without any changes whereas the body's material and change is a very common nature of it. So, answer to the question what makes a person same at different times is that an immaterial soul. The reason for them isthat the soul is indivisible. This kind of opinion we can clearly see in Descartes's philosophy. Descartes gives an answer to the question of whom I that I am a thinking thing which is indivisible. Contrary to this view, John Locke tries to prove that the substantial identity would not give the identity of a person over time but consciousness gives the identity to the person over time. This explicit and radical expression of Locke on this problem leads to many disputes in the philosophical world among the philosophers. Still today also it is a newborn baby in the hands of philosophers.

In this paper, my major focus on the 17th and the 18th-century concept of personal identity. In particular, how it was treated by philosophers, namely, John Locke, Leibniz, Butler, and Thomas Reid. In order to that, I will discuss Locke's account of personal identity in the first section. And in the second section, we shall see objections raised by Leibniz, Butler, and Reid and also their account of personal identity. Finally, the conclusion follows.

2. Section 1
2.1 John Locke's Account of Personal Identity
John Locke (1632-1704) in his masterpiece work "An Essay Concerning Human Understanding", he devotes one chapter "Of Identity and Diversity" to explain the concept of personal identity. Before giving a clear explanation of this concept, he gives a general account of the notion of identity. According to Locke, the concept of identity is a relative idea. Therefore, he says, the identity of a substance or a thing consists in the relation of the substance with the notion of time and also space. He writes: "When... we demand whether anything be the same or no, it refers always to something that existed such a time in such a place, which it was certain, at that instant, was the same with itself, and no other..." (Locke, 1975:204). And moreover, he said that two principles are necessary for the notion of identity: firstly, a thing has only one beginning for its existence in any particular time and place; and secondly, it is not possible for two things having one beginning. It is clear, in his view, that the identity of a thing always relates with time and place and the thing in that time and place is individual and identical to itself.
And another point he insists that different substances have different identity conditions. That means, for him, identity conditions for an atom, a parcel of matter, and a living organism is different. For instance, consider an atom. According to Locke, that atom is the same individual with itself in any instants of its existence as long as its existence since it continues without any changes and it exists in a determined place and time. But, in the case of a parcel of matter, Locke says, unless and until a new particle added to, or a particle subtracted from that parcel that parcel is identical with itself. But the case is completely different when we take living organisms, such as plants, animals, and man and so on, into account. In these cases, Locke holds, identity consists in “... the same continued Life communicated to different particles of Matter, as they happen successively to be united to that organiz’d living Body” (Locke, 1975:208). In short, for him, the identity of living bodies consists in the same ‘continued life’ irrespective of changes in the body particles.

Another important claim Locke states regarding the notion of identity that “...we must consider what Idea the word it is applied to stands for: It being one thing to be the same Substance, another the same Man, and a third the same Person...” (Locke, 1975:207). In this quote, Locke is saying that the terms ‘Substance’, ‘Man’, and the ‘person’ are three general terms and they are referring to three different kinds of ideas. On the ground of this view, Locke considers that the identity criteria depend on different principles. For instance, the identity of the substance (body) depends on the particles of matter. And, the identity of the man depends on the principle of the same continued life communicated with particles of matter (body). Therefore, on Locke’s view, one thing might be the same substance, the same man and the same person at a given time and it may not be the same at another time.

With these presuppositions, Locke introduced the concept of personal identity. He defines person as “a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection... consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing... which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable in thinking...” (Locke, 1975:208). According to this quote, a person must have some properties or qualities: it must be a thinking and intelligent being; and also, it must be a self-conscious being. To attribute these qualities to a person, Locke’s main intention maybe this that only a thinking, and intelligent, and self-reflected being considers it as the self at any given point of time.

And, Locke’s answer to the question of what makes the identity or sameness of a person is quite interesting that the ‘sameness of consciousness’ makes the identity of the person. He writes “in this alone consists Personal Identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational Being” (Locke, 1975:208). And moreover, he said that we can say a person as the same person as far as this consciousness go back to any particular past event or experience in his/her life.

While insisting consciousness alone constitutes the identity of a person over time, Locke tries to discard the Descartes’s notion of metaphysical substance (soul) and its importance since Locke, as an empiricist, argues that we have no knowledge of the true nature of metaphysical as well as material substances. To strengthen this claim, he said that we have only simple ideas of the properties of material and immaterial substances which are derived from our sensation and reflection. On the ground of this, he insists, neither identity of metaphysical nor material substances constitutes the identity of a person but the ‘sameness of consciousness’ alone.

The core intention of Locke to cultivate this concept of personal identity is that he treats the term person as a ‘Forensick’ term. He writes: “it is a Forensick Term, appropriating Actions and their Merits, and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of Law, and Happiness and Misery” (Locke, 1975:218). In this quote, Locke statement is saying that a person is an agent who capable of law. So to speak, a person is nothing but a moral agent. In Locke’s understanding, it is possible only when a person is conscious of his actions at different times. On the basis of this intention in his mind, he raised a question that “For supposing a MAN punish’d now for what he had done in another Life, whereof he could be made to have no consciousness at all, what differences are there between that Punishment and being created miserable?” (Locke, 1975:218-219). Locke’s argument in this question seems noteworthy that even though if we accept the possibility of the sameness of the soul through different time periods, if there is no memory of actions which had done in any one of our past life then giving punishments to the person in this present life for those deeds, in a true sense, is not at all consider as punishment. Rather, it is simply creating a misery in present life. Similarly, for Locke, punishing a sober man for his actions which he had done in the intoxication situation is also not considered as punishment but merely melancholy. Locke’s principal reason is that these two, sober and intoxicated person, are different persons since the sober man has no consciousness of the actions of an intoxicated person.

Locke’s this radical hypothesis and assumptions regarding the concept of personal identity give a more scope to some philosophers to defend the notion of metaphysical substance and its role in the identity of a
person over time. Three philosophers, Leibniz, Butler and Thomas Reid are the noteworthy persons who explicitly defend the importance of metaphysical substance.

3. Section 2

3.1. Leibniz, Butler and Reid's account of Personal Identity

In this section, we shall examine these three philosophers' counter-arguments to Locke's account. Though Leibniz, Butler, and Reid have common opinions on metaphysical substance, they maintain their own flavor in their arguments.

Firstly, G.W. Leibniz (1646-1716), as a rationalist philosopher, strongly defends the importance of substantial identity. His explicit critics on Locke's account we can see in his book "New Essays on Human Understanding" especially in chapter 27 of "What Identity and Diversity Is". According to Leibniz, substances are 'monads'. And moreover, he says these are "the true atoms of nature...the elements of things" (Leibniz, 1961:17). Therefore, unlike Locke, he insists the identity of any complex substance only based on the identity of these 'monads' rather than time and space. A remarkable reason he said that 'monads' are identical with themselves. Furthermore, he said that by means of these things we separate one time or place from another.

When we take into the account of personal identity, one excerpt gives us a very clear idea about what exactly Leibniz's thoughts he writes:

"I also hold this opinion that consciousness or the sense of I proves moral or personal identity. And that is how I distinguish the incessancy of a beast's soul from the immortality of the soul of man: both of them preserve real, physical identity; but it is constant with the rules of divine providence that in man's case the soul should also retain a moral identity which is apparent to us ourselves, so as to constitute the same person, which is therefore sensitive to punishments and rewards" (Leibniz, 1981:236).

Three points we can understand from this quote that: first, like Locke, Leibniz admits the importance of consciousness, which gives the sense of I and which proves the moral or personal identity. Second, unlike Locke, he insists that the soul preserves the 'real', 'physical' identity. In particular, in man's case, this soul is subject to punishments and rewards. And finally, Leibniz makes two kinds of identities for a man that on the one hand 'real identity' and on the other hand 'moral or apparent identity.'

Primarily, it seems us Leibniz accepts Locke's account. But, the factual point is that he openly rejected Locke's idea that apparent or moral identity in the absence of real identity. Rather, he says "...an identity which is apparent to the person concerned...presupposes a real identity..." (Leibniz, 1981:236). In other words, consciousness presupposes the soul. Moreover, he argues, even in the cases of gaps in our memory we need not consider us as different persons since testimonial knowledge, third-person account, would help us to remember events in our life. It is sufficient to get punishments or rewards according to our deeds in those gaps. And also, he argues that whatever 'puzzle cases' Locke proposed, for instance, the same consciousness in the absence of the same body and the same soul, they might be logically possible but not naturally.

Next, in order, Joseph Butler (1692-1752) and Thomas Reid (1710-96) are the philosophers who explicitly rejected Locke's account of personal identity. We can see their accounts in their books "The Analogy of Religion" and "Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man" respectively. Reid's one statement about Butler's views tells us one clear point that how Reid's views on the concept of personal identity are very similar to Butler. Reid writes: "Bishop Butler...with whose sentiments I perfectly agree" (Reid, 1850:234).

According to Butler, asking a question like wherein personal identity consists is utterly wrong since he thinks, it is indescribable. But, for him, the idea of personal identity arises in the mind when it compares the consciousness of one's own existence in any two different moments.

Both Butler and Reid accept a point from Locke that the consciousness or memory helps as evidence to remember our actions which were done in the past. But, both reject undoubtedly Locke's claims that the consciousness constitutes the identity of a person over time and it is a necessary and sufficient condition. Like Leibniz, both insist that it is self-evident that the consciousness or memory presupposes something which is simple and identical. Therefore, according to them, memory cannot constitute the identity of a person.

Additionally, Reid says it is absurd to say that the memory constitutes personal identity since it is nothing but attributing "...to memory or consciousness a strange magical power of producing its object, though that object must have existed before the memory or consciousness which produced it" (Reid, 1850:237). Moreover, Reid with his Brave officer example tries to show an absurdity in Locke's account. The example is:
"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 campaign, and to have been made a general in advanced life; suppose, also, which must be admitted to be possible, that, when he took the standard, he was conscious of his having been flogged at school, and that, when made a general, he was conscious of his taking the standard, but had absolutely lost the consciousness of his flogging" (Reid, 1850:235).

In this example, according to Locke, the schoolboy and the brave officer is the same person and also the brave officer and the general is the same person but the schoolboy and the general is not the same person since the general has no consciousness of his flogging. Contrary to this, Reid's argument is that "...if there be any truth in logic, that the general is the same person with him who was flogged at school" (Reid, 1850:236).

Reid said that according to the principle of identity is 'transitive', the general and the schoolboy is one and the same. Therefore, he argues, since Locke's account is not following the principles of logic, his account of personal identity is absurd.

In addition, both Butler and Reid rejected another two concepts of Lockethat the idea of the sameness of consciousness, and the concept of identity.

On the former view, Butler argues the idea of sameness of consciousness is absurd since consciousness is short-lived. Moreover, He argues that the consciousness of our own existence at different ages or different moments is not the same consciousness but "different successive consciousnesses" (Butler, 1860:325). Also, Butler argues that if personal identity consists in consciousness alone then it is a 'fictitious' idea since a person is different at every moment. Similar to Butler, Reid also tries to show the difficulties in Locke's account. He states, since the consciousness is momentary, if the identity consists in consciousness then he says"...no man is the same person any two moments of his life; and as the right and justice of reward and punishment are founded on personal identity, no man could be responsible for his actions" (Reid, 1850:238). Both Butler and Reid, consider it is a great trouble to the morality.

And, on the latter view, Butler and Reid argue that Locke's usage of the notion of identity is mistaken. The reason according to them is that the identity what we are applying to the existing things, for instance, a plant, is not at all a perfect identity since we don't know whether they have been continuing at least with a single particle over time or not. In the terms of Butler, this kind of identity is nothing but 'loose' and 'popular sense' of identity. But, in the view of Butler, 'strict and philosophical manner' of identity can only be applicable to a person since "the identity of these, therefore, cannot subsist with diversity of substances" (Butler, 1860:324). Reid also admits Butler's view. In Reid's view, we can say perfect identity only applicable in the case of a first-person account, whereas in the cases of third-person account and other things the identity is 'imperfect'. Additionally, he said that all our mental actions such as pain, pleasure and consciousness and so forth are merely individuals and momentary. Therefore, he concludes, their identity is imperfect. And therefore, Locke's account is absurd.

After observing Butler and Reid's arguments against Locke we can clearly understand their account of personal identity. Both are strongly defending one point that substantial identity alone constitutes the personal identity instead of mere consciousness. Moreover, Butler insists, the notion of self is not an abstract idea or quality of something. Rather, he says, it is a being "which is capable of life and action, of happiness and misery" (Butler, 1860:327). In addition, he said that all beings continue the same throughout the whole time of their existence. Besides this, Reid suggests that the person is something like Leibniz's 'monad' which cannot be divided into further parts.

4. Concluding Remarks
So far we have look at the concept of personal identity in the eyes of four notable philosophers. For Locke, consciousness constitutes the identity of a person over time instead of the substantial identity. He holds that a person at time t1 and the person at time t2 are different if at the time t2 he has no consciousness of his actions at time t1. Whereas Leibniz, while admitting the importance of consciousness from a moral perspective, he strongly defends the importance of substantial identity. In the cases of Butler and Reid, we have seen the idea that personal identity consists in consciousness is absurd since, for them, it is momentary. On their view, the substance which is not divisible into parts constitutes the identity of a person at any two different times and our intuition is enough to believe we are the same person over time. However, a few points are very clear. First, as Locke said we don't know the true knowledge of metaphysical substance. Therefore, merely on the ground of a belief about metaphysical substance and its identity over time is not sufficient to justify the belief that the substantial identity constitutes a person's identity over time. Second, as Leibniz admits we cannot deny the role of consciousness or memory to identifying ourselves as the same at different instances since if we take first-person account, Locke's notion of the memory is the only source to us to say we are the same person at any two different instances. Moreover,
Locke's comprehension of the term person in a moral perspective seems acceptable since we must have to know why we are punishing or rewarding. This is only possible when we are conscious of our actions.

End Notes

1. Locke had distinguished substances into three kinds: God, finite Intelligence, and material bodies. For him, God is an absolute substance. So, He insists, no need of any proofs for God's identity. He gives different identity conditions for remaining other two kinds of substances (Locke, 1975:204).

2. Galen Strawson makes a point clear that how Locke treat the phase 'sameness of consciousness'. The sameness of consciousness "makes certain past experiences one's own in the way that certain present experiences are one's own" (Strawson, 2011:189).

3. Locke seems to use the term consciousness in two senses: One sense is that he used it as the memory with which we remember events of our past actions and experiences at any given point of time. And another sense of using the term consciousness is that our reflection of present thoughts and experiences. In this latter case of consciousness, memory is not at all play any role. Regarding the concept of personal identity, Locke seems to use this term consciousness synonymous with memory. However, Galen Strawson pointed out a noteworthy point that the general kind of identification of consciousness with memory is a wrong notion. He says "consciousness of past actions and experiences, which does, of course, involve memory, is just one special case of consciousness" (Strawson, 2011:72).

4. According to Descartes, metaphysical substance (soul) cannot divisible into parts whereas a body can be divisible. Therefore, for Descartes, the soul is the simple and indivisible thing that gives the notion of 'I'. So, we can understand a point according to Descartes that the soul gives the identity of a person over time.

Reference