

5-1-2005

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### Recommended Citation

Larson, Ben (2005) "Locke Against Himself: The Case For Re-evaluating the "Lockean" Concept of Personal Identity," *Macalester Journal of Philosophy*: Vol. 14: Iss. 1, Article 3.  
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/philo/vol14/iss1/3>

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# **Locke Against Himself: The Case For Re-Evaluating the “Lockean” Concept of Personal Identity**

**Ben Larson**

John Locke, when it comes to questions about personal identity, is chiefly concerned with how we determine who we hold responsible for actions deserving of praise and punishment. That is to ask, how do we determine the identities of “people,” so that they may own the actions they’ve done in the past? Locke uses memory as the definition of personal identity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, yet his recipe for building a person—found in his work entitled *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*—gives us a different picture. In fact, Locke’s real perspective on personal identity may be much closer to that of the contemporary philosopher Derek Parfit, an advocate of a broader view. An arrival at this conclusion is dependant on understanding the Lockean definitions of person and personal identity, and his writings on education. One must also understand the origins of Parfit’s theory of personal identity, and how it works. Finally, the argument that Locke misrepresents his real view of personal identity in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* will take two forms, both stemming from his work on educating children. First, Locke believes essential character traits make up a person. Second, contrary to the caricature of Locke as a purely nurture-centric, he believes in innate characteristics, and these must contribute to a person’s identity. These arguments will demonstrate that Locke’s view of personal identity can no longer be viewed in terms of accepted definitions involving memory alone.

## I

We must take care to differentiate between “a person” and “personal identity.” A person, according to Locke, is “a thinking *intelligent being, that has reason and reflection*, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places; which it does by that consciousness which is inseparable from thinking, and, as it seems to me, essential to it.”<sup>1</sup> To be recognized as a person, you must make it beyond simply being a member of the human species. You must be rational, and capable of abstract thought in some form. Personal identity, on the other hand, is jargon for verifying that a person, from one day to the next, is the *same* person. For Locke, we determine personal identity by “the sameness of a rational being; 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 it was then; and it is by the same self with this present one that now reflects on it, that the action was done.”<sup>2</sup> This traditional definition can be captured in one word: memory. If a person remembers doing an action, he is the same person who perpetrated that action. If he can’t be made to remember it, he is not. This is, at least, the view Locke presents in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*. We shall see that his true belief is not so clear cut.

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<sup>1</sup> Locke *Human Understanding* II.27.9 (reprinted in Schick and Vaughn 282, emphasis added).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid* (emphasis added).

Before moving on, let's briefly examine the implications of this memory-driven theory of personal identity. In a famous thought experiment on the subject, Derek Parfit writes:

Suppose that a man aged ninety, one of the few rightful holders of the Nobel Peace Prize, confesses that it was he who, at the age of twenty, injured a policeman in a drunken brawl. Though this was a serious crime, this man may not now deserve to be punished.<sup>3</sup>

Locke's response, if we are to extrapolate from *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, would be, "You are wrong, Mr. Parfit. This man does indeed deserve to be punished, because the Nobel peace laureate is the same person at age ninety that he was at age twenty. The proof? He *remembers* committing the crime. The Nobelist should be punished as if the crime had been committed yesterday." On the other hand, according to Locke's theory, someone who doesn't have a mental record of their crime should not be convicted. This idea underlies the tendency in our legal system for passion crimes to receive lighter sentences than premeditated ones. It also legitimizes the insanity defense. The implications of this Lockean definition impact the world both theoretically and practically.

## II

Now that we've examined Locke's view of personal identity and its implications, let's return to his definition of a person. Rationality is the key word here. Since humans do not arrive from the womb with full rational abilities, they are not Lockean persons. Instead, "children are the raw material out of which persons are

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<sup>3</sup> Parfit *Reasons and Persons* 326 (reprinted in Schick and Vaughn 275).

made.”<sup>4</sup> Because of this, Locke sees education as the crucial process in which children are taught how to become persons. This is the classic Lockean nurture argument, for Locke doesn’t just refer to erudition when he uses the word “education.” Education encompasses *every* aspect of child rearing.<sup>5</sup> Each physical and mental particular of Locke’s educational theory is based on the imperative that children must be taught to live by reason.

The physical part of Locke’s regime is at times an enlightened version of “that which does not kill you makes you stronger.” Locke saw youth as the time when the body could be fortified against harsh conditions later in life. He encouraged boys<sup>6</sup> to play outside instead of loafing around the house and sitting by the fire. By playing outside, a boy would “accustom himself also to heat and cold, shine and rain; all of which if a man’s body will not endure, it will serve him very little purpose in this world.”<sup>7</sup> Children should be given very little meat or beer (if any), and should only be allowed “good dry bread” between meals.<sup>8</sup> Locke even advocated that children wash their feet in cold water to toughen them up!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Laine 3.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid* (note 3).

<sup>6</sup> As radical as Locke’s views on education were at the time he was writing, Gay reminds us that Locke is no modern liberal. For instance, Locke uses “boy” when referring to a child because he didn’t consider writing a book on educating female children. “Locke was, after all, addressing his little book on education to a gentleman, on the subject of the education of that gentleman’s son and in the hope that other gentlemen would read it. It never occurred to him that every child [or *any* young girl!] should be educated or that all those to be educated should be educated alike...as for the poor, they do not appear in Locke’s little book at all” (Gay 12-13).

<sup>7</sup> Locke *Education* §9.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid* §15.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid* §30.

If Locke's suggestions for the physical upbringing of children are based on the denial of sensory comforts and pleasures, his broader mental strategy is based on children learning to deny all their unfit desires using reason:

It seems plain to me, that the principle of all virtue and excellency lies in a power of denying ourselves the satisfaction of our own desires, *where reason does not authorize them*. This power is to be got and improved by custom, made easy and familiar by an early practice...children should be used to submit their desires, and go without their longings, even from their very cradles.<sup>10</sup>

Since Locke's definition of a person hinges on reason, it's logical that he would emphasize this cultivation of reason in child rearing; after all, "The child is the father to the man."<sup>11</sup> That is, a kid becomes an adult after enough "person training"—training to use reason instead of simply caving to his desires.

Every part of education should teach children rationality. Punishment and reward systems must strictly follow this criterion. Punishments and rewards, in a behavioral learning sense, are tools of operant conditioning. Locke's end goal for this conditioning regimen is, again, to teach a child to command his mental and outward behavior using reason. Some forms of punishment and reward dangerously subvert this ultimate goal. For example, if a parent rewards his child with sweets for some academic feat, the parent is simply teaching the child to crave sugar. The pupil doesn't then study for the love of learning, but simply for the sensory pleasure of sweets.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, if a

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid* §38 (emphasis added).

<sup>11</sup> Gay 11.

<sup>12</sup> Locke *Education* §52-3.

parent wantonly beats his child for a misdemeanor or failure, there are negative results. The child will hold the parent in contempt, for children “distinguish early betwixt passion and reason.”<sup>13</sup> Worse, a child will behave or study hard only to avoid beatings.<sup>14</sup> Any animal can be motivated to avoid pain, but this fear has nothing to do with being rational.

Locke recommends praise and shame instead, as the carrot and stick, respectively:

Children (earlier perhaps than we think) are very sensible of praise and commendation [and disapproval]. They find a pleasure in being esteemed and valued, especially by their parents, and those whom they depend on. If therefore the father caress and commend them, when they do well; show a cold and neglectful countenance to them upon doing ill...it will in a little time make them sensible of the difference; and...work more than threats and blows.<sup>15</sup>

Not only does this strategy of behavior modification avoid the pitfalls of whippings and gratuitous material rewards, it also allows for the ability of the parent to rationally communicate the reason behind the reinforcement. A parent might say, “I’m ashamed of you, son, because of X,” or “I’m proud of you, daughter, because of Y.” This is an excellent example of the way Lockean parents should serve as models of rationality for their children.

Although Locke declares that children are naturally sensitive to “esteem or disgrace,” he does

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<sup>13</sup> *Ibid* §77.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid* §48. Although Locke does recommend the rod be used sparingly (and preferably not at all), he does note that “there is one, and but one fault, for which, I think, children should be beaten; and that is obstinacy or rebellion” (*Ibid* §78).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid* §57.

believe parents should take steps to *ensure* children will respond to such methods.<sup>16</sup> “Agreeable or disagreeable things should accompany these different states.”<sup>17</sup> That is to say, a child held in the esteem of a father might be entitled to candies, and might be prone to getting beaten if his father held him in disgrace. In this way, a child satisfies his physical desires only by his “state of reputation;” “the objects of [a child’s] desires are made *assisting to virtue*.”<sup>18</sup>

Locke uses the word “virtue” here to describe the way a child’s current behavior is regarded by his parents. But he uses the word over sixty times in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education*, with a broader meaning. It is the most important of four things a father should take care to instill in his child: virtue, wisdom, good-breeding, and learning (in that order).<sup>19</sup> An examination of these traits will unravel Locke’s prior professed view that personal identity is wholly dependent on memory. The memory thesis will be further assailed when the caricature of Locke as a strict nurturist is discarded. First, however, we must understand an opposing view of personal identity: the Bundle Theory.

### III

The Bundle Theory was pioneered by David Hume. He believed personal identity consisted of “nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.”<sup>20</sup> Hume rejects any sort of “featureless

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid* §58.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid* (emphasis added).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid* §134.

<sup>20</sup> Hume 162.



“I” that stands apart from the experiences and perceptions a person has. Try as he might, he could never “catch [himself] at any time without a perception;” Hume was always forced to define himself by “some particular perception or other.”<sup>21</sup> For instance, if you were to reflect on “who you are,” perhaps you might say, “I am generous.” This would presumably be based on your perceptions of past events in which you acted generously, and not some cosmic “I” that has the inherent property of generosity.

This theory was expanded upon by Derek Parfit:

According to the Bundle Theory, we can’t explain either the unity of consciousness at any time, or the unity of a whole life, by referring to a *person*. Instead we must claim that there are long series of different mental states and events—thoughts, sensations, and the like—each series being called one life.<sup>22</sup>

Parfit agrees with Hume (and Buddhists, incidentally),<sup>23</sup> and the implications for his theory of identity are huge. By declaring that “our beliefs, attitudes, desires, values, and...actions”<sup>24</sup> are what make up what we call a distinct person, Parfit suggests it is not “numerical identity” (being the same body that did X) that dictates moral responsibility, but “sameness of character”<sup>25</sup> (having the same beliefs, attitudes, desires, values, and actions as the body that did X). Therefore, since Parfit’s “Reformed Nobel” has none of the same characteristics as the twenty-year-old rascal who injured the police officer, he would not deserve

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Parfit *Nature of Persons* (reprinted in Schick and Vaughn 292).

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Schick and Vaughn 276.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*

punishment, regardless of his memory. Parfit's conception of personal identity is at work when parole boards re-evaluate the character of an inmate, and in statues of limitations, which restrict the length of time a man or woman may be convicted of a crime.<sup>26</sup> We can now see that Parfit's view competes with the traditional Lockean view in theory as well as practice.

#### IV

With a version of the Bundle Theory in mind, Locke's four character traits begin to look very different. Virtue, wisdom, breeding, and learning are analogous to Parfit's list of traits that, in a bundle, form a distinct person. A discussion of each of Locke's key characteristics will demonstrate this. First is "virtue," which is too broad for Locke to explicitly define.<sup>27</sup> It is likely a combination of manners, morals, and everything else the word implies. Locke does note that the path to virtue must begin with a strong belief in God.<sup>28</sup> Beyond this, one should always be truthful, and good natured and loving toward others.<sup>29</sup> Moving on to "wisdom," Locke instructs a parent to raise his child with a love of truth and "worthy thoughts," and an aversion to cunning and deceit.<sup>30</sup> Time and socialization will take care of the rest. "Good-breeding," the third quality, is simply the opposite of two ill qualities: "sheepish bashfulness; and...a misbecoming negligence and disrespect in our carriage."<sup>31</sup> These can be avoided simply by caring for

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<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Locke *Education* §139.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid* §136.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid* §139.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid* §140.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid* §141.

oneself and others, respectively.<sup>32</sup> Locke places “learning” last, because he believes the preceding attributes will make learning fall into place quite smoothly.<sup>33</sup> All four traits could easily be construed as versions of Parfitian beliefs, attitudes, desires, and values.

We are left with Locke against Locke. His writings on education apparently contradict his writings on human understanding. In the latter, he clearly argues that personal identity is based on the faculty of memory. An individual is responsible for what he or she can remember doing. In his pedagogical writings, however, we see a much more complicated picture of personal identity. A Lockean person has many traits, and the goal of education is to cultivate certain desirable qualities. Locke implicitly argues that a person is defined in some way by these traits. In any case, it has been demonstrated that Locke’s view of personal identity is more intricate than he lets in on *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

## V

To complicate things further, *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* undermines the simplistic view of Locke as a puritanical nurturist, adding to the case against his belief in a theory of personal identity based on memory alone. Most government classes paint Locke as “that Blank Slate guy,” and Locke certainly believes humans are impacted by their environment. If he didn’t, he would not have written a book on educating them. However, he is not as radical as he’s made out to be. Here are Locke’s own words against the caricature:

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid* §147

We must not hope wholly to change [the] original tempers [of people], nor make the gay pensive and grave, nor the melancholy sportive, without spoiling them. God has stamped certain characters upon men's minds, which, like their shapes, may perhaps be a little mended; but *can hardly be totally altered and transformed into the contrary*.<sup>34</sup>

There are other similar examples. For instance, Locke states that one tenth of a person's attributes are innate, and that education must be suited to developing one's "natural genius."<sup>35</sup> It now appears impossible for Locke to hold that a person is distinct based on memory alone, for he has admitted that men have God-given characteristics. Could a devout man like Locke deny that a trait handed down from The Almighty is an integral part of personal identity? It is more likely that Locke's real view of personal identity is more complex than usually assumed.

Did Locke ever arrive at a concise theory of personal identity for *himself*? It is unclear. He gives a straightforward definition in *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that uses memory as its gold standard. But his reflections in *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* seem to reject such a simplistic view of identity. What can be pieced together from Locke's pedagogical writings suggest his real view of personal identity was much closer to Derek Parfit's version of the Bundle Theory than his memorial definition. This is probably a good thing for Locke; as we saw from Parfit's thought experiment, the Bundle Theory does a better job of designating moral accountability. A person, after all, is a complicated thing. We should strive to define personal identity in

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<sup>34</sup> *Ibid* §66 (emphasis added).

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid* §1.

broad terms, as Parfit does. Locke, as I have shown, would probably agree.

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