

Strict Identity

Being exactly the same in all respects

including being in the same place at the same time.

Identity

Being a later or earlier state of the same thing.

The problem of identity

Metaphysical: What makes something be the same thing from one moment to the next?

Epistemological: In virtue of what do we consider a later thing to be the same thing as an earlier thing?

We can't answer either problem by just by appeal to resemblance

because very different earlier and later things might be identical (e.g. egg, chicken)

and very similar things may be different (e.g. two peas)

Locke's base criterion for identity

No two things of the same kind can both exist in the same place at the same time.

So whatever things have the same “beginning of existence” (go back to the same place at the same time) must be identical

Since no two things can have left that place

Conversely, if one thing goes back to one place at an earlier time and another goes back to a different place at that time, those two things cannot be the same but must be different.

(This is a “forensic” notion of identity: it reflects how police operate in identifying perpetrators)

Implication

“Splitting” and “joining” are impossible.

Whatever exists in one place at one time is one thing and can never become two

Whatever exists in two different places at the same time is two things and can never become one

This makes sense supposing we are talking about “atoms”

(either physical atoms, or souls, considered as indivisible mental substances)

As a matter of fact, all cases of splitting and joining of things (amoebas, cannibals) concern composites.

These are really cases of aggregation and separation of parts of individuals.

Problem

To tell what things have the same beginning of existence, you have to be able to trace back their history of motion and rest.

But to do that, you have to be able to identify them over time.

So it seems we need to already be in possession of a criterion of identity in order to apply this criterion.

And that there needs to be something more that makes a thing be one thing from one moment to the next

Locke's explicit solution to the metaphysical problem
(by appeal to the implication concerning
splitting and joining)

Supposing splitting and joining are impossible,

at any subsequent moment there can be at most one
thing that is the earlier thing

even if we can't pick out exactly which among all the
later things it is or determine exactly what makes
just it and no other be that same thing

So as long as a thing continues to exist its identity with at
most one later thing is the case by default and even in
the absence of any spelled out criterion for picking out
which is the identical later object.

“For being, at that instant what it is, and nothing
else, it is the same, and so must continue, as long as
its existence is continued: for so long will it be the
same, and no other.”

— *Essay II.xxvii.3*

Implication

We don't need to invoke a notion of "substance" as a thing that provides unity over time and binds the successive states of changing things together.

Locke's implied solution to the epistemological problem

Determining identity over time reduces to determining what the history of motion and rest of a thing has been.

We might do this by keeping an eye or hand constantly upon an object

(note that this presumes that we are certain of our own identity over time and that our memories of past views or grasps of an object are really ours and no one else's)

Or we might make the assumption that, other things being equal, greatest resemblance at most proximate distance at most proximate time fixes identity.

A residual question:

What is it that we trace back from moment to moment?

A simple substance (an atom or soul)?

A collection of substances?

A complex mode?

Some complex modes we might trace back:

- Preserving the same shape or organization of parts
- Continuing to perform the same function

Some complex functions:

- Life
- Accessing a restricted body of information

Base criterion for identity of composite things

As long as a composite continues to be composed of identical parts, it is identical.

Regardless of how the parts might move around.

Criterion for identity of machines

However sometimes the arrangement matters,

e.g., a machine is thought to cease to exist if
smashed to pieces

In this case, the continuity of the arrangement matters
more than the identity of the parts

because substituting parts is not thought to destroy
the identity of the machine over time

e.g., ship of Theseus

In the case of identity of machines, we are not concerned with the identity of substance, but with the identity of a complex mode (in this case a manner of arrangement)

The complex mode must exist in some initial composite substance to begin with.

At this beginning point, any complex modes of the same kind existing in other composite substances are diverse.

But from the initial point forward, identity consists in continued possession of the same arrangement over time, not the same substantial parts.

Criterion for identity of plants and animals

In this case, even the arrangement of parts may change

e.g., larvae, moth

e.g., amputation

But as long as whatever organization of parts is present continues to preserve the same life, we think there is identity

So here the complex mode thought to be identical over time is life

Implication

The criterion of identity is different for different cases.

In some cases, it is identity of substance that we are concerned with.

But in a number of important cases, we are not concerned with the identity of substance, but instead with the identity of a complex mode that might be transferred between different substances.

Multiplicity of criteria for human identity

If we have souls or spirits, the criterion for our identity is that for substances.

But insofar as we have animal bodies, the criterion for our identity is that for plants and animals: continuation of the same life in a possibly changing organization of differing substances.

This opens the possibility that souls may change bodies.

And there is a further complication

Personal identity

The criterion for being the same person or moral agent is distinct both from the criterion for having the same human body and from the criterion for having the same mind.

What makes me consider myself to be the same from one moment to the next is my exclusive access to my thoughts and memories

No one else has that access

And I have no access to anyone else's thoughts and memories

So, if something happened to me so that I couldn't remember my own past, I would no more identify with my past life than I would with anyone else's

But the collection of thoughts that makes up my consciousness could just as well be transferred from one brain or one soul to another as one soul or one brain could be transferred from one body to another.

Implication

What makes someone the person they are is ultimately the bundle of ideas that they have access to,

not the particular mental or physical substance that happens to contain those ideas

(the ideas could be transferred from one mental or physical substance to another)

A further implication:

Even if you could prove that your soul is immortal, that wouldn't prove that you are immortal

Because what you are as a person is a collection of ideas, not the particular substance that has those ideas.

What makes you the same person over time is your current privileged access to your past ideas.

Wherever that exists, that is where you exist.

But that is just a bundle of information. It can be readily transferred from one container to another.

It can also be very easily destroyed.

A final implication

Since moral responsibility lies with the person, identifying the body of the perpetrator of a crime is not always sufficient for identifying the person

e.g., sleepwalking, perhaps insanity, amnesia

(Indeed, given a sufficient amount of time, the body is likely never composed of the same substances it was at the time of the crime.)

And the same may also hold for the relation between minds and persons.

Our assurance that personality is never transferred between different substances is ultimately based just on faith that God would not allow such a thing to happen.