

LOCKE'S THEORY OF IDENTITY

The first edition of the *Essay* was published in the December of 1689. Locke was not content to leave the *Essay* as it was, for he actively sought out suggestions which could be incorporated into a second edition. From his correspondence it is clear that he was particularly interested in securing comments from William Molyneux. In one of his many letters to Molyneux in this regard, Locke asked if he could suggest any additional topics under the headings of logic or metaphysics (no. 1592, iv:627). Molyneux responded by suggesting that Locke "insist more particularly and at Large on *Æternæ Veritates* and the *Principium Individuationis*" (no. 1609, iv:650).¹ By his own admission, Locke's now famous chapter "Of Identity and Diversity" was written solely in response to the latter half of this suggestion. In the penultimate paragraph of his reply to Molyneux on 23 August 1693, he writes:

You will herewith receive a new chapter Of Identity and Diversity, which, having writ only at your instance, 'tis fit you should see and judge of before it goes to press. Pray send me your opinion of every part of it. (no. 1655, iv:722)

It is important to note that Molyneux's request is a very broad one, and that Locke responds accordingly. That is, he begins this chapter by developing a general theory of identity, which he subsequently applies to various kinds of entities. As Edwin McCann has recently pointed out, there has been relatively little discussion of Locke's general theory of identity (1987, 54). If the first several sections of II.xxvii are discussed at all, they are usually treated as a mere window dressing for Locke's theory of personal identity, which is taken to be the real focus of the chapter. With McCann, I contend that this approach gets things backwards.

In this chapter I attempt to set things aright by focusing exclusively upon Locke's general theory of identity. In Part One I discuss his concept of identity, and I begin by discussing what he takes to be its psychological

¹ Locke's letter (no. 1592) is dated 20 January 1693; Molyneux's response (no. 1609) is dated 2 March 1693.

origin. I subsequently discuss his use of this concept, in both synchronic and diachronic statements of identity. In Part Two I discuss Locke's principle of individuation, and why he claims this principle to be "*existence it self*". In Part Three I discuss Locke's requirement that identity be "suited to the idea,"² and the related claim that our difficulties with this relation are largely due to "the little care and attention used in having precise Notions of the things to which it is attributed" (§1). In the first section of part three I argue that this claim reflects his observation that sorts of changes which we think an F can undergo and still continue to exist are largely determined by our concept of an F. In the second section I consider whether this view involves the relative identity thesis, and I argue that it does not. And finally in Part Four I argue that Locke's theory of identity is compatible with two very different accounts of what it is for an object to exist at different times, namely, one which states that objects persist by enduring through time in their entirety, and one which states that objects persist by being temporally extended.

I. LOCKE'S CONCEPT OF IDENTITY

1. The psychological origin of this concept

As Molyneux suggests, Locke does touch upon the topic of identity in the first edition of the *Essay*, e.g., at I.iv.4 and II.i.12 (1609, iv:650). But as Curley has so clearly argued, there are serious difficulties with Locke's first edition treatment of identity (1982, 302-14). For one thing, although he contends (in I.iv.3-5) that the idea of identity is not innate, he makes no attempt to account for its origin. Perhaps because he is himself aware of this lacuna, he begins his chapter on identity with just such an account: "Another occasion, the mind often takes of comparing, is the very Being of things, when considering any thing as existing at any determin'd time and place, we compare it with it self existing at another time, and thereon form the *Ideas of Identity and Diversity*" (§1). According to Locke, we form the idea of identity by taking notice of the fact that the thing which was in one place p_1 at t_1 is the thing which is in p_n at t_2 . By mentioning a case in which we succeed in reidentifying an object, he gives the impression that forming the idea of identity involves *correctly* judging the thing which was in p_1 at t_1 to be the thing which is in p_n at t_2 . But surely this is a mistake, since the same

² This phrase occurs in Locke's subtitle to §7 of Locke's chapter on identity, "Of Identity and Diversity" (II.xxvii). Unless otherwise noted, all references to particular sections of the *Essay* should be understood as references to sections to this chapter. Some references will also include page numbers from the Nidditch edition of the *Essay*.

idea of identity is involved in both correct and incorrect judgments of this form.

Locke does not explicitly account for the origin of our concept of *diversity*. Perhaps he feels no need to state the obvious point that once we have the idea of identity, we can form the idea of diversity by negating an identity-statement. That is, we form the idea of diversity by taking notice of the fact that the thing which was in p_1 at t_1 is *not* the thing which is in p_n at t_2 .

Locke's account of the origin of this idea seems to accord an essential role to the passage of time. Thus in giving this account, he might seem to be endorsing Hume's contention in the *Treatise* "that the view of any one object [at a single time] is not sufficient to convey the idea of identity" (I.iv.2:200). I doubt that he would rigidly maintain this thesis, however. For as I shall argue in the next section, Locke does not share Hume's thesis that "we cannot, in any propriety of speech, say, that an object is same with itself, unless we mean, that the object existent at one time is the same with itself existent at another" (I.iv.4:201). Hence it would seem that there is a way of forming the idea of identity which does not involve the passage of time. Certainly the passage of time is not essential to forming the idea of diversity. Indeed, the clearest cases of numerical diversity are those which involve distinct objects at a single time. And if we can derive the idea of diversity through the negation of an identity-statement, we should similarly be able to derive the idea of identity through the negation of a diversity-statement. In other words, we can form the idea of identity by entertaining the thought that the thing which is F is *not* distinct from the thing which is G.

2. Diachronic and synchronic identity-statements

Here I intend to develop two important contrasts between Locke and Hume on the concept of identity. I begin by discussing the above-mentioned fact that unlike Hume, Locke finds synchronic identity-statements to be both intelligible and unproblematic. I subsequently discuss the fact that unlike Hume, Locke thinks that diachronic identity-statements regarding mutable objects have a chance of being *true*.

From Locke's account of the origin of our idea of identity, Gary Wedeking concludes that Locke takes 'identity' to be "an *essentially temporal concept*, expressing a relation which obtains exclusively between objects at different times" (1990, 181). That is, Wedeking contends that Locke's concept of identity is relegated exclusively to *diachronic* statements of identity, statements in which an object existing at one time (in its entirety) is said to be identical with an object which exists at another time.



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