Locke and Hume on Personal Identity

Locke and Hume both discuss the idea of personal identity in connection with certain general claims about the very idea of identity in a more general sense and I am going to begin, prior to discussing personal identity in particular, with a comparison of their specific treatments of the general idea of identity. Locke makes some surprising claims about the idea of identity as he begins by describing it as a notion we arrive at by comparison of one thing existing at one time with the same thing taken as existing at a different time. This approach to the notion of identity has to hence view the claim that a thing at one time is identical to itself as a derivative sense of identity when it is usually thought that this is the basic case of identity with the transitive case being derivative of it. Locke turns this around but after doing so points out that two different things could not have begun at the same time and place and hence indicates a basis for the first application of the idea of identity in terms of location of the beginning in time and space something had. Locke begins to apply this when he distinguishes between the three kinds of substances he takes to exist, namely God, finite intelligences and bodies. There is no question about identity concerning God since God would never have a beginning and could not change. But finite intelligences, by contrast, will all have a particular time and place at which they being so the relation of them to that beginning will give us a basic sense of their identity. This would also apply to bodies so long as the bodies in question remain composed of the same portions of matter.
On these grounds Locke claims that the principle of individuation can be found in the existence of the given thing though with bodies he modifies his account in relation to living things since his general criteria, if applied to living bodies, would ensure that a grown tree was a different substance to the acorn that was first planted or a grown horse different from a colt. So in the case of living bodies Locke finds the identity to reside not in the parts that make up the body, since these parts change, but in the life that is constant amidst the change of the parts of the body. The life is continuous despite the lack of continuity of the parts of the body and this life can be traced back to its first moment. This general point applies to animals and plants alike and effectively, in this respect, a human being (or a “man”, as Locke writes) is in the same situation.

There are some consequences of the account Locke has here given of the notion of the identity of the human being to which I will return later. But first consider a problem with the general account of identity of life that Locke has set out, a problem that comes from J.L. Mackie. Mackie mentions that daffodil bulbs often divide spontaneously at a certain point of their development and this produces the situation that after division both have the same relation to the originating state so both would appear to have a claim to be identical, on Locke’s criterion, with the first bulb prior to the division which leads to the situation that two different things would then stand in a relation of identity with each other. It would be natural then to claim, in response that the moment of division led to the extinction of the original bulb so that there is no relation of identity between the two halves of the
divided bulb with the original one. However, one of the problems with this response is that if, immediately after the division, one of the new halves was destroyed we would seem to be happy to accept that the surviving one had a relationship to the original prior to division. So if, in this second case we can trace a continuous history and make an identity claim, why could we not in the case where both halves survived?

This kind of problem with Locke’s general view of identity helps to explain why Hume’s general view of identity is motivated in opposition to it. Hume claims that the notion of identity is one we apply to something that persists, in an invariable way, over time and that this is a different notion to several different objects existing in succession which latter, even if it involves a close relation, we should term a diversity. So, like Locke, he thinks of the relation of identity in the first instance as a transitive one, not as a notion describing a relation one thing has to itself at the same time. Hume’s next move is to claim that the distinction between these two distinguishable ideas is one that creates problems for the imagination as the feeling of the two different ideas is very similar. Effectively Hume thinks that we tend to “swap” the notion of diversity with that of identity and assume that there is identity when there is not. In other terms, there are connections between different objects in succession that have a close relation to each other and we assume an identity, that is, an invariable object, to be existent by assuming that the same thing is present to the senses.
Whilst Hume derives the sense of identity from observation of distinct states his view is not just different from Locke’s in its sceptical result. Hume also does not allow an even derivative significance for the view that identity is a relation something has to itself at a given time. However Hume’s account, whilst built out of similar materials to Locke’s, shows clearly a sense that neither have taken account of when it comes to identity and this is the way it asserts a relation that has nothing to do with temporality. After all, the identity of “12” with “6 x 2” and “10 + 2” is not an identity of distinct temporal items. But if the identity that applies in this case does not require reference to time then the basic need to account, in the first instance, for identity as a relation a thing has to itself, prior to any notion of reference to time, is, despite the views of both Locke and Hume, vindicated after all.

A central reason, however, why both Locke and Hume tend to approach the general understanding of identity in terms of a discussion of distinct times, is due to their shared ultimate interest in personal identity and it is to this that I will now turn. So, on Locke’s view, the identity of a human being is no different from the identity of an animal or plant. This is part of his reason, though, for thinking that bodily continuity is not what is at issue for us in statements of personal identity. Similarly, Locke also does not think that continuity of something immaterial, like a mind or soul, is at issue in personal identity and, in explaining why this latter is not key, he begins to resort to thought experiments. With regard to the notion of a mind or soul some have thought it possible that these could be resurrected in
different bodies, the notion known as transmigration of souls. Certainly such people could not identity the person with the body they occupied but they also have to face a problem of their own. This is that should it be the case that I am the same person as once walked the earth in the person of Achilles and yet have no memory of having carried out the acts of Achilles then it hardly matters to me, in a personal way, what actions Achilles carried out. Since this is so, it can no more be what is at issue for talk of personal identity to be concerned with an immaterial substance than it can to be concerned with the body. This being so, it can’t be a matter of concern with any kind of substance that is at issue when discussing personal identity.

This leads on to neatly to Locke’s positive notion of personal identity in which he describes a person as “a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing in different times and places”. This sense of the person then relates the nature of the person to the consciousness that is capable of forming a self-conscious notion of itself. Consciousness that accompanies thinking is what enables us to speak of a self with the result that, as this consciousness extends backwards, so it discovers the same centre of experience as itself and claims to be the same self now as it was at any given previous moment of existence. To this account there is an obvious objection that Locke endeavours to dispose of. This concerns the phenomena of forgetting, specifically the fact that previous moments of consciousness are not merely forgotten at present but become irretrievable. So what is to say that the present awareness that speaks of itself is identical with a previous moment
in that consciousness’ own history when it has lost any awareness of that previous moment? Locke presents this doubt as one that should be considered only as naturally arising if we conflate personal identity with substantial identity, when he has been careful to distinguish them from each other. Locke’s point here is that the change of substance, so long as the consciousness remains the same, cannot affect the claim that there is continued personal identity. However, whilst this point against theories that rest personal identity on continuity of substance is well made it does not address the problem that really arises from cases of radical forgetting. In such cases, is there or is there not, continuity of personal identity?

Locke claims that personal identity involves a special kind of concern so that, whilst I would be unhappy to learn that a person is about to suffer a serious misfortune, my unhappiness concerning this would be very different if I learned that person was *me*! This concern is one Locke takes to be with passions, that is, with pleasures and pains. However, whilst this adds another dimension to his account it does not help with the case of radical forgetting and Locke considers one case of this, namely, the case where an element of my experience is entirely lost to me under the influence of great intoxication. In such a case the one who suffers the great intoxication and experiences certain things under its influence is the same human being as I am but, as Locke is forced to concede, he is not the same *person* as I, precisely because I have lost all memory of his actions. The reason why we hold that responsibility holds for the actions of the one human being committed in this state on I, who am not the same person as
the one in that state, is due to the fact that the law has no way of discerning for sure whether I have truly and completely forgotten the actions I performed whilst in it. Further, Locke claims, in any case, that the term person is, as he puts it, a “forensic term appropriating actions and their merit; and so only belongs to intelligent agents capable of a law, and happiness and misery”.

This view has been subjected to some serious criticism, not least by Hume. But, before turning to Hume, I wish to mention a criticism made by Mackie. Mackie points out that the consequence of Locke’s view is very paradoxical. Since I, at the present time, have only a selective sense of what was occurring to myself at a previous time and this sense is what is at issue for Locke, it follows, on his account, that I relate only to the events and actions of that previous person and not really to the person who was performing them. As Mackie points out, there needs to be, in addition to the understanding of these actions, a view of who was performing them and this latter notion is not picked out on Locke’s view. This is why Mackie describes Locke’s view as “a theory of action appropriation rather than of personal identity”.

Hume’s criticism of the Lockean theory though, takes the opposite direction to this problem raised by Mackie. Hume begins his discussion of personal identity by asking what impression the idea is meant to be derived from? The problem here is that some particular impression is indicated to be needed for the idea to have arisen from and yet the notion of the self is not the notion of a single impression but that to which all our impressions are
collectively meant to refer. So if we have an impression that is meant to
give rise to the idea of the self it should stay constant but, in fact, all
impressions change. So we can have derived the idea of the self from no
particular impression and hence there is no such idea. Hume pointedly
departs from the Lockean conception of consciousness producing a sense of
self-consciousness that is equivalent essentially to an idea of personal
identity. Hume points out that when I turn my attention to myself that what I
encounter are particular perceptions so that: “I never can catch myself at any
time without a perception, and never can observe anything but the
perception”.

When perceptions are removed then I become insensible and, in
such a state, such as in deep sleep, I may, states Hume, be said truly not to
exist. Hume’s account of the self thus emerges as a view of it as being only
a “bundle” of perceptions with the point being that there is nothing in the
mind that accords either with ideas of simplicity or identity. The notion of
identity in general is one, given the considerations mentioned earlier, that
Hume takes to be only a fiction so the notion of personal identity, as a
particular form of the general idea of identity, must also be a fiction. In
relation to the sense of personal identity, however, Hume adds a new
consideration when he refers to the point that all our perceptions are distinct
from each other, a point that follows from his general adherence to the
separability principle. Hume then points out that the mind’s tendency to
think in terms of identity is itself grounded on association of ideas with each
other. There is not, hence, an observed “real bond” among our perceptions, there is only a felt one between the ideas we form of our perceptions.

When the imagination reflects on our ideas it attributes the quality of identity to different perceptions although this identity does not really belong to the different perceptions as some bond bringing them together. The only uniting principles are those of resemblance, contiguity and causation and it is on these that the idea of identity depends. The memory, for example, raises up images of past perceptions and in doing so the imagination is moved to pass from one previous perception to another until they all appear to belong together as part of the same object. So the memory, in producing a relation of resemblance between perceptions, produces the sense of identity. Memory is the chief source of personal identity on this account and it brings an association of causes in its train. By this process the discovery of personal identity is produced by the process of memory. On these grounds Hume dismisses deep inquiries into the identity of any specific thing as not really being philosophical difficulties at all but merely inquiries into the grammar of certain terms. There is at the root of all such inquiries a fiction or imaginary principle of union.

Hume’s account thus terminates in a rather more sceptical way than Locke’s but, like Locke, Hume has to face the objection that his account has located only ways in which things are attributed to a notion of a self and has not produced a sense of what it is that they are attributed to. Should this be thought a serious criticism it is possible that it indicates a chief source of problem with the procedure of empiricism.