**John Locke 2023 Essay Competition**
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**Philosophy Q2: In what sense are you the same person today that you were when you were ten?**

If you were asked, “Are you the same as when you were ten?”, the intuitive answer would be “no”. You may be taller, weigh more, or perhaps your hair length is different. You may be wiser, or more experienced. But if you were instead asked, “Is that ten year old you? Are we talking about the same person?”, you would likely say, “Yes, that was me”. So how do we reconcile these two different points of view? What makes one thing the same as another? More specifically, what makes two people, or a person and their past self, the same person?

In this paper, I provide an answer to that question, concluding that I am the same person as my ten-year-old self. There are three parts to my argument. First, I argue that the best definition of sameness identifies two things as the same when they share an essential trait. Second, I contend that the essential trait of a person is living a life of the kind that people live. Third, I argue that as long as a continuous timeline exists between someone today and who they were at ten years old, then they are the same person. Since I fulfill this condition, I am the same person as my ten-year-old self.

Part I: Sameness

It appears paradoxical that two things can be the same while also being different. My ten-year-old self is obviously different from me today–I have a different personality, body, and set of memories. How could we be the same person? To begin tackling this apparent paradox, we need to develop a robust concept of sameness, starting with what “same” does not mean. “Same” does not mean “absolutely no change”. Everything changes constantly: cells are created, atoms vibrate, and the universe expands each millisecond. If “same” meant “absolutely no change”, it would be trivially true that nothing is ever the same as its past or future self, so this definition cannot be used for a discussion of sameness.

Our concept of “sameness” can be refined by analyzing the meaning of “same” in everyday usage. Consider the following examples. When we say that two people have the same interests, we mean they enjoy similar activities. The phrase “We grew up in the same city” implies that both of us spent our childhoods in parts of the same physical space. These examples show that in order for two things to be the same, they must possess a common trait in which they are identical. The examples also reveal two further criteria for sameness. First, two things need not be alike in every way to be the same. Two people may have similar interests but different degrees of passion on the subject; you and I may have grown up in the same city, but at different points in time. Second, there are certain essential traits that must be shared; not any trait will do. If two people have equal passions for different interests, we

wouldn't say they have the same interest. You and I didn't grow up in the same city if our hometowns shared a name but are located in different places. What these essential traits are is based on what the entities in question fundamentally are: an interest is fundamentally a passion about a subject, not a particular depth of passion; a city is fundamentally a place, not a name.

Under this definition of sameness, two people are the same if they share the essential trait of being a person. The next section identifies and defines this trait.

Part II: The Essential Trait of a Person

One popular view is that the essential trait of being a person is possessing certain psychological capacities, such as consciousness or strong reasoning abilities. (Gordon-Roth 2019) However, I argue instead that a person needs a continuous timeline, or history, to be thought of as a person.

This aligns with the concept of a person employed in our everyday usage of the word "person". When talking about a person, we typically refer to their whole life, not a single moment. "Gandhi" refers to a person whose life involved possessing a variety of physical and psychological traits, making many decisions, and interacting with society in countless ways. It does not refer to "Gandhi" only at the point in time in which he best embodied the psychological traits he is most associated with, nor does it refer to only his psychology. This view is similar to Marya Schechtman's "Person Life View": "To be a person is to live a 'person life'; persons are individuated by individuating person lives" (2014 p.110). The essential trait of a person is having the kind of life that persons have, hereby referred to as a "person-life".

There are several advantages to this definition. First, a person's life is more fundamental to being a person than their psychological capacities. After all, without a life, such capacities cannot be formed. Schechtman summarizes empirical studies that confirm this: ". . . the sophisticated psychological and agential capacities of human persons depend upon social scaffolding to develop. Human infants who are not exposed to . . . the appropriate kinds of developmental stimuli will not develop the kinds of cognitive, social, and affective capabilities that are found in mature persons" (2014 p.116).

Second, this view better accounts for our treatment of people whose psychological capacities are greatly diminished, such as people who suffer from dementia or are in a persistent vegetative state. While we don't treat people with such ailments identically to people without them, we still recognize and relate to them as persons based on the life they once lived.

Third, having certain psychological capacities is not a satisfactory essential property of a person because it generates incorrect conclusions about sameness. If two people in front of you somehow had the exact same memories, thoughts, or psychological abilities, you

wouldn't say they are the same person, because they aren't living the same life.

Therefore, the essential trait of a person is having a person-life. We can therefore conclude that one person is the same as another if they share the same person-life.

Part III: The Parts and Whole of a Person-Life

This definition still requires further inquiry. How can we tell whether two people share the same person-life? To answer this question, we must analyze personal identity from the perspective of mereology, the study of parts and whole.

The definition of a whole consists of two requirements. First, a whole includes a sum of parts. A human body is a whole made up of many parts, such as the limbs, head, and torso. However, a whole is not merely a way of collectively referring to these parts. Secondly, a whole must have an *emergent property*–a property exhibited by a whole that is not present in its constituent parts. Without emergent properties, nothing would differentiate a combination of parts from a whole. Parts must come together in a specific way to form a whole: a collection of body parts put together, as happens in *Frankenstein*, doesn't automatically create a person.

If a person is a whole, and the essential trait of a person, living a person-life, is an emergent property of that whole, we still must ask what are the parts that had to come together to form the whole person, and what is the nature of those parts  This is where the mereological concept of continuity is helpful. Continuity describes the connectedness and coherence of parts in a whole, giving rise to seamless connection instead of disjointed parts.

There are two dimensions of continuity: space and time. Physical entities have continuity throughout space. When pointing to different parts of a road, you wouldn't say that you are pointing to two different roads; similarly, you wouldn't point at two parts of a building and claim they are different buildings.

Continuity through time is more relevant to identifying the sameness of persons. When an entity exists continuously throughout time, it remains the same whole, even though its constituent temporal parts–each "version" of it at different points in time–are different from each other. Consider the thought experiment of the Ship of Theseus. If each part of the Ship of Theseus was exchanged for a new part, once all the parts were replaced, would it still be the "Ship of Theseus" or a new ship? The continuity of the ship over time suggests that it is the same ship it once was: it remains the same ship before and after each time a part is replaced, so at no point does the ship cease to be the Ship of Theseus.  (Encyclopedia Britannica 2021)

Based on this understanding of continuity, we can make sense of a person as a whole, which

is composed of parts that are continuous through time. Considering the timeline of a person-life, there are discontinuities at the beginning and end of the timeline. Between those discontinuities are continuous parts, forming a whole from which a person-life emerges; each part is the person at a specific time. Two temporal parts of persons are correctly said to be the same person when they are both living the same person-life.

Therefore, I am the same person as my ten-year-old self as long as we are continuous temporal parts of the same whole. One last detail remains to be specified: under what conditions are these parts continuous with one another?

I argue that two temporal parts of a person are continuous if their psychologies are. This builds upon a theory of identity proposed by John Locke, but builds upon it by considering the temporal parts of persons. John Locke's theory of psychological continuity held that two people were identical if they possessed "sameness of consciousness"; two persons at two points in time are the same if they possess the same memories. This theory drew on the intuition that what makes someone a person is their consciousness and rational capacity. (Schechtman 2011)

However, this theory faces powerful objections. Memories may be mistakenly formed, so one may have the memories of another person without actually being them. More theoretically, if a copy of myself were created with the same consciousness and memory, Locke's view would hold that the copy and I are the same person, but intuitively only I, the original, am the same person as myself.

Defining temporal parts of a person as continuous if their psychologies are allows my theory to capture Locke's intuitions that psychological traits matter for identity while also avoiding the above objections. If person A mistakenly remembers themselves experiencing things that person B experienced, my theory concludes that person A is *not* person B, since there is no temporal part of person A that is part of the person-life of person B. In the copied self scenario, my copy is not a temporal part of *my* person-life; there is no continuity between the copy and my past temporal parts, even if my copy inherited my memories.

Some philosophers propose amending Locke's view to include a requirement that there are overlapping chains of memories connecting a person and their past self. At best this requirement helps the theory handle such counterexamples, but has no explanation *why* a person's identity is based on connected memories. My theory is built on independently justified definitions of sameness and of a person, and generates intuitive conclusions about tough cases without having been built specifically to handle such cases. Therefore, it is likely reliable for answering questions of identity in general, including the overall question of this essay.

To conclude, sameness is best defined as being identical in a shared essential trait, and the

essential trait of a person is having a person-life. If a person at one age is psychologically continuous with who they were at another age, then they are part of the same person-life at both times. Since this is true for me, I am the same person as my ten-year-old self.

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