

Handout 6

Locke: Identity

IDENTITY. In describing the use of general terms, we can observe the distinction between the criteria of application and the criteria of identity associated with them. Criteria of application tell us whether a given term is applicable to a given individual. Criteria of identity tell us whether an individual to whom the term applies is the same as another individual to whom the term also applies.

Example 1. The term ‘white’ has criteria of application. If I present you with a red piece of paper, you would be able to state, ‘This paper is not white’, and if I give you a white piece of paper, you would be able to state, ‘This paper is white.’ Yet the term ‘white’ has no criteria of identity. If I present you with two white pieces of paper (having the same colour, that is) on two different occasions, you have no way of telling whether it is the *same white* object (white ‘something’) on these occasions. To say, ‘It is the same white’ is not even grammatical. By contrast, you may very well be able to say whether it is the *same piece of paper*.

Following Locke, let us call the terms equipped with criteria of identity ‘sortal terms’. One consequence of the distinction is that only sortals can be counted. I can count pieces of paper in this room, but I cannot count white objects.

The question Locke asks is just this: what is the content of saying that something that exists on some occasion t_1 is the same thing existing on another occasion t_2 ? Different sortals have different criteria of identity. Consider first what Locke calls ‘parcels of matter’. What makes us think that in this bottle is the same volume of water as it was yesterday? Presumably the fact that there are the same atoms in bottle now as there were yesterday. So the identity of two parcels of matter is determined by the sameness of atoms in each of them.

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Question 2. Formulate the criteria of identity of indivisible atoms.

The situation is markedly different with other sortals. A dog Toffee constantly loses bits of matter. But here is the same Toffee as there was yesterday. With animals, as with people, plants and artifacts, identity is determined by the causally continuous history of ‘life’. Toffee barking today is the same Toffee barking yesterday because Toffee today (a temporal slice of Toffee) has an uninterrupted causal history containing a barking Toffee yesterday (another temporal slice of Toffee). That is: what makes Toffee today the same Toffee as yesterday is the fact that Toffee today has the history of Toffee’s interactions yesterday.

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Question 3. Should rivers have criteria of identity? Contrast their identity criteria with those of animals.

RELATIVE IDENTITY. One consequence of Locke’s view is that, since different sortals have (in general) different criteria of identity, x can be the same F on two different occasions, but not the same G . Is this how we usually speak and think? Presumably x should be allowed to fall under two different sortal concepts.

Example 4. Pete Sampras is a *man* (one sortal) and a *tennis player* (another sortal) in 1993. Suppose now that in 2016 he is still a man, but not a tennis player (assuming that a retired tennis player is not a tennis player). Is he though the same tennis player in 2016 as in 1993? This is a slightly confusing way of putting the question: we have just agreed that in 2016 Sampras is not a tennis player to begin with. Let us then imagine a concrete context in which this question can be asked. Suppose I watched Sampras play in 1993. In 2016 I am introduced to him in person. So I wonder, ‘Is this the same tennis player I watched in 1993?’ The form of this question is clearer: is x the same F as y ? So one might say, ‘It is the same tennis player you watched in 1993, but he has since retired.’ Alternatively, one might say, ‘No, it is not the same tennis player. He is not a tennis player any more. He is still the same man though.’ It is not clear, I think, which answer is the more natural one.

By the same token, let us say that among the criteria of identity of a tennis player is the style of his backhand. Suppose that Sampras played a two-handed backhand in 1993, but came out of retirement in 2016 and began playing a one-handed backhand. Then conceivably he is *a* tennis player in 2016, but he is not the same tennis player as in 1993. This corresponds to much of our common talk. We might say that Sampras in 2016 is a ‘changed player’, a ‘different player’. All the while we do not doubt, however, that Sampras is the same man. So at the end we have the result that Sampras may be the same man in 1993 and 2016, but a different tennis player.

The thesis of relative identity elevates these observations into the following principle: the claim ‘ x is the same as y ’ is an incomplete expression. We can only ask whether x is the same F as y , where F is a sortal term. And since, almost trivially, different sortals have different criteria of identity, we have situations where x is the same F as y , but not the same G as y .

SOME PUZZLES. Let us briefly look at some problematic cases of identity.

Watch. Suppose a watch exists intact at t_0 . It is disassembled at t_1 and its parts are taken to different corners of the world. Later on at t_2 those same parts are put together again. Is a watch at t_2 identical to the watch at t_0 ? On what grounds can we decide the issue?

Ship of Theseus. A ship is repaired over the years. The parts that are discarded are assembled to make another ship. While at t_0 there was a ship S_1 consisting of the parts $\{P_i^1\}$, in t_2 there is a ship S_2 consisting of the new parts $\{P_i^2\}$ and a ship S_3 consisting of the discarded parts $\{P_i^1\}$. So which ship is identical to which one, if to any?