

# John Locke Essay Competition

## Category: Philosophy

**Prompt:** In what sense are you the same person today that you were when you were ten?

### I. Introduction

Intuitively, ‘being the same person’ subsumes an undeniable sense of continuity. Therefore, when personal identity is conceptualised by Locke as “sameness of consciousness”<sup>[1]</sup> or by Parfit as determined by the “continuity” of distinct psychological states<sup>[2]</sup>, it seems reasonable to attribute ‘being the same person’ to having an unchanged personal identity. Whether you are the same person today that you were when you were ten can be considered using the following questions:

1. In what ways does a person remain ‘the same’ over time?
2. Can there be hindrance to the sustenance of the ten-year-old self?

In answering the first question, I wish to capture the primary criteria for representation of identity as “hard” or “same”: consistency, which can be demonstrated in various forms ranging from physical to psychological.<sup>[3]</sup> The latter would help examine when identity can be classified as “soft” or adaptive to stimuli.<sup>[4]</sup> The distinction helps capture the sense in which you stay “the same” and the sense in which you change.

Upon analysing the aforementioned conditions, I contend that whether one is the “same person” as when they were ten, depends on whether they follow the ‘soft’ or ‘hard’ approach, or an amalgamation of the two.

### II: In what ways does a person remain ‘the same’?

Demystifying the concept of “identity” is crucial to define what classifies someone as the ‘same person’. Locke contends that personal identity is constituted by spatio-temporal continuity of consciousness, which alludes to a succession of experiences, wherein each is intertwined by the previous “spatially” and “temporally” i.e. over space and time<sup>[5]</sup>.

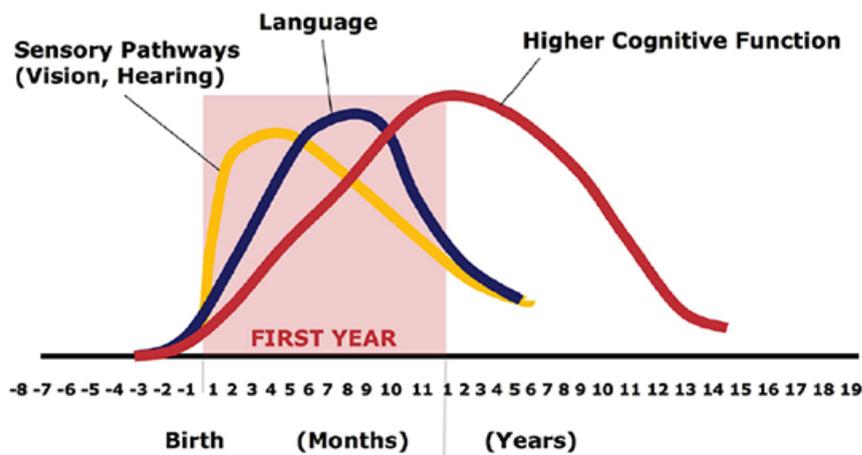
Subsequently, Parfit proposed the psychological continuity theory which supposes that personal identity is determined by continuity of psychological characteristics including memories, beliefs, and desires.<sup>[6]</sup> He suggests that our memories connect our past and present selves, but persistence of our identity relies on continuity of the underlying subject of those experiences.<sup>[7]</sup> For instance, if an individual faces PTSD after enduring sexual assault, there may be a disruption to the continuity of their experiences, in terms of unwillingness, inaccuracy, or inability in recalling the assault. However, their “identity” may still be retained because the enduring entity of their core sense of self that connects the experiences is

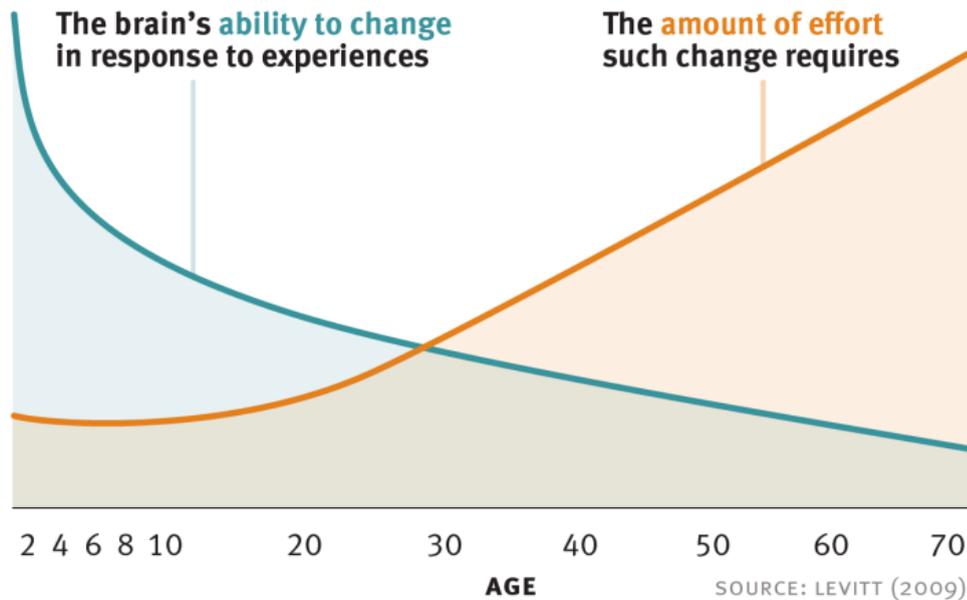
persistent. Thus, for one to sustain their “identity”, there doesn’t need to be an unbroken chain of one’s psychological states, as long as there is an overall sense of coherence.<sup>[8]</sup>

Somers, on the other hand, emphasises the significance of “situating social narratives in historically specific relational settings”.<sup>[9]</sup> This raises a key question: What role do the “dimensions of time, space, and relationality” i.e. the “narrative *location*”<sup>[10]</sup> play in the extent to which a particular occurrence affects our inherent sense of self? The narrative theory argued by Ricoeur holds that our personal identity is determined by continuity of these social narratives, which — if not interrupted — gradually unfold into the circumstances we navigate as the people we become.<sup>[11]</sup> Besides, to establish presence of a persistent identity, the bodily continuity theory proffered by Atchley calls upon the requisite of continuity in an individual’s body: congenitally as well as upon considering the soul or the self as a physical entity.<sup>[12]</sup>

These interpretations represent the “hard” conceptions of identity as they propose that our everyday sense of “identity” has “continuity” and “sameness over time or across persons”<sup>[13]</sup>. The first ten years of our lives are paramount in the development of our brain architecture as “ more than 1 million new neural connections form every second”, indicating a higher capacity for change in personality traits in response to environmental stimuli.<sup>[14]</sup> As one ages, brain plasticity (or flexibility) decreases, making it less adaptable to extrinsic triggers<sup>[15]</sup>, as depicted below.

### Human Brain Development Neural Connections for Different Functions Develop Sequentially





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[17]

Thereby, later in life, a person may be less likely to change from when they were ten in response to their experiences. This alludes to how intensity and the nature of circumstances can influence whether coherence in personal identity is disrupted or not, and to what extent.

Erikson's psychosocial theory posits eight stages of development based upon the epigenetic principle, wherein each stage introduces a distinctive psychosocial challenge.<sup>[18]</sup> However, while he proposes that we evolve through these phases, we presumably still uphold a core sense of self-identity or "ego identity". The accomplishment of each stage conduces the genesis of a "positive ego identity" which not only serves as the anchor for ensuing phases, but also nurtures a sense of 'sameness'.<sup>[19]</sup>

Additionally, Rogers and Mead's self-concept theory contends that everyone has an internal perception of themselves, which constitutes their values, traits, and skills and that we tend to cultivate a narrative by amalgamating these components which embody our distinct, almost timeless, essence.<sup>[20]</sup> Despite these elements being susceptible to changes, our fundamental set of ideals and characteristics purportedly remains stable; this consistent sense of psychological unity is deemed to foster connectivity.

Corroboration of claims concerning self-consistency is immanent in personality theories like the Big Five Model, which entails five broad personality traits — conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness, extraversion and neuroticism — that are regarded to remain "fairly stable across much of the adult life span".<sup>[21]</sup> Personally, when I shifted schools, visibly I became more vocal or 'open'. What one may mistake for a reformation of identity was, in actuality, a newfound ability and willingness to embody preexisting disposition, by virtue of being placed in a more congenial environment.

Piaget's theory of cognitive development serves us another approach to assess the 'sameness' of an individual: cognition. He fragmented his analysis into four stages, ranging from sensorimotor to formal operational, each having discrete methods of thinking. [22] Despite proposing that people experience notable cognitive growth as they encounter these stages, he propounds that they plunge into each new stage with preexisting cognitive frameworks and then build upon them in response to fresh knowledge and occurrences. [23] One seems to seep into each stage upon accommodation, assimilation and preservation of precursory information [24], thereby establishing coherence in cognition.

Another aspect of psychological continuity entails consistency in the emotional relationships we cultivate. Bowlby's attachment theory states that we develop internal working models, hinging on our early attachment experiences, of ourselves and those around us. [25] Notwithstanding the conventional understanding of attachment as a learned behavior, Bowlby delineates it as "lasting psychological connectedness between human beings". [26]

Ultimately, what it is for someone to be the "same person" over time is discipline dependent since each theory or field is working with different conceptions of personal identity.

### III: Can there be hindrance to the sustenance of the ten year old self?

Stuart's "simple memory" interpretation of Locke's work states: "For as far as any intelligent Being can repeat the Idea of any past Action with the same consciousness it had of it at first, and with the same consciousness it has of any present Action; so far it is the same *personal self*". [27] According to this, Locke attributes the capability to "repeat the Idea of any past Action" to memory itself i.e. how different or similar you are now to when you were ten is deemed contingent on memory. [28] Ergo, the claim that what you are now is an evolved yet continuous version of what you were then, is reliant on the fact that you not only sustain the memories of the experiences until you were ten, but also possess the ability to consciously recall all foregoing events. That is unreasonable; as one ages, the process of synaptic pruning in the brain persistently causes pre-existing information to be displaced by incoming data. [29]

As per Lockean views, if memory is taken to be logically essential and sufficient for personal identification, the sheer impossibility of retaining every single life experience implies that as one ages, they undergo the phenomenon of "person decay". [30] This rate of deterioration can be decelerated by engaging in memory-toning activities, and accelerated by the advent of illness or shock. [31] For instance, experiencing progressive memory loss or amnesia due to conditions like vascular dementia or Alzheimer's disease, causes one's memory to decline and their personal identity to become fragmented. The infamous HM suffered from anterograde amnesia post surgery, causing inability to form new memories, and partial retrograde amnesia, causing loss of memories before the surgery. Even though his loved ones continued to characterise him as polite and cooperative, they identified in him increased subservience and immaturity [32], presumably the result of his inability to recollect past experiences which

culminated in “person decay” since continuity of his consciousness was impeded. This lack of continuity corresponds with the “soft” approach.

On the contrary, the information integration theory by Tononi<sup>[33]</sup>, the higher-order thought theory by Rosenthal<sup>[34]</sup>, and the global workspace theory by Baars<sup>[35]</sup>, while acknowledging the fact that memory may aid awareness of past experiences, do not deem it to be a prerequisite for consciousness. If we take a minimalist approach, consciousness of perceptual experiences like the immediate awareness of sensory stimuli is plausible without reliance on memory.

On the outset, one undergoes visible physical changes in their bodies after the age of ten, most significantly, hitting puberty which, in accord with the theory of biological growth and maturation, induces the natural and gradual process of physical development. Puberty prompts the development of secondary sexual characteristics as a result of hormones such as oestrogen in girls and testosterone in boys,<sup>[36]</sup> which ultimately incites one to question the ‘sameness’ between their ten-year-old and adolescent selves. The Sorites paradox lies in the question: do you physically stop being the ‘same person’ when your clothes stop fitting you the ‘same’ way as they once did? There is an imminent lack of clarity upon when this ‘metamorphosis’ in identity occurs, making an absolute stance on this subject flawed. In the same vein, one’s physical abilities evolve during this time, either due to muscle development, a boost in cardiovascular capacity, or increased agility. But again, just because I am six feet now or capable of doing fifty pull-ups doesn’t make me a different person altogether.

Alternatively, Hume posits that personal identity is an illusion and denies the possibility of a persisting self in his bundle theory. He suggests that our experiences, thoughts, and emotions are not connected to a single entity, but are a perpetual, ever-evolving “bundle” of experiences.<sup>[37]</sup> This view also signifies one of the “soft” conceptions of identity, which acknowledge its propensity to be fluid and multi-faceted.

Furthermore, while constructs like “race”, “ethnicity”, and “nationality” may remain constant, one’s perspective can still be ephemeral and inherently malleable based on social influences. This brings us to Mills’s argument, which claims that one can “understand her own experience”, and by relation, their personal identity which is affected by said experience, “only by becoming aware of those of all individuals in her circumstances”.<sup>[38]</sup> Upon achieving Mills’s “sociological imagination”, i.e. “grasp(ing) history and biography and the relations between the two within society”, one can recognise the pertinent function of history of the individual and the society in maintaining one’s personal identity.<sup>[39]</sup> Mills takes the example of war to illustrate how structural issues don’t just affect the personal milieu of a person, but that of innumerable people. He indicates that, often, people do not have control over regulating their social environments since there are fundamental societal obstacles which may disrupt the “continuity” of their “identity”. Structural unemployment in the economy may feed into a worker being laid off, which may elicit a curtailment of their “identity” because their socio-economic status has now fallen<sup>[40]</sup>; a change to inefficient political leadership in a country may increment a person’s propensity to commit a crime, leading to them being

imprisoned for theft, and invariably impacting their “identity”. These mark exemplifications of the “soft” approach.

## IV: Conclusion

The constant back and forth between the “hard” and “soft” interpretations and “the ‘identity’ crisis in the social sciences” is what prompts social scientists like Brubaker and Cooper to suggest abandoning the whole concept of “identity” for alternative analytic idioms that supposedly constitute the right “amount” of “softness” and “hardness”.<sup>[41]</sup>

Personally, not having encountered any traumatic experiences or physical injuries that may glaringly fragment my “identity”<sup>[42]</sup>, I contend that I am, in most ways, the “same” person that I was when I was ten. However, a definite resolution cannot be made owing to the underlying subjectivity of the term “identity” and its “sameness”.

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