



Section 3. Philosophy

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JOHN LOCKE & DESCARTES REFUTE ON HUME'S CONCEPT OF SELF

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Abstract

In many literary works, the characters transform into a “new man”. For example, Tom Joads in *Grapes of Wrath* is transformed from a selfish character who prioritizes his own survival under the social background of the Great Depression. After traveling with his family to California. Young Joads gradually become sober towards the suffering of lower class Americans, turning into a righteous man who fights for social justice. Nevertheless, I disagree with the concept “new man”, because despite the ceaseless stream of time and transformative experiences we undergo, our personal essence is constant through time. Meaning that we do not form a complete new self through the transformation of time and experience. To understand this we will be examining the concepts of personal identity defined by memory and consciousness throughout the period of human life. Locke believes that experiences form a human being, and that the concept of individual consciousness will demonstrate the inherent continuity and persistence of the self that are presented through a comprehensive understanding of nature's capacity for transformation over the span of time. Therefore factors such as individual perceptions and impressions in shaping one's sense of self, along with the influence of moral development and virtue on individual identity do not alter the core of identity. Indeed, Descartes, who views the human consciousness as the only object that holds true in the universe, agrees that we are not able to perceive the objective truth. The view point we will argue is in contrast to that of Hume and his bundle theory of identity; we will, therefore, first give an exposition on Hume's critique of a stable personal identity, which it separated into qualitatively identify, and numerical identity.

Keywords: *Philosophy, Self, identity, Time, John Locke, Descartes, Aristotle, Conscious, Identity, Reality, René Descartes, David Humes, time, change*

Thesis

Hume challenges Locke's idea of a fixed and continuous self, emphasizing the role of per-

ceptions and impressions in shaping our identity, and Decartes's philosophy on the objective existence of beings. He believes that the set

identity alters through time instead of building upon each other. This claim shifts focus to development: Aristotle's ethical framework highlights the importance of moral development and virtuous actions in the formation and evolution of one's identity. By integrating these philosophical perspectives, this thesis aims to examine how identity persists using Locke's theory on personal identity that centers around memory and consciousness suggesting that we stay the same as long as our memory exists.

Locke, Descartes, and Humes

David Humes is famous for his skepticism towards the consistency of self, believing that: Hume is an empiricist who thinks all knowledge comes from the senses – and the impressions (the *us* present in other's views) derived from the senses are constantly shifting. Meaning our sense of self comes from ideas of the self; the idea of self comes from impressions; impressions change. Since we are a bundle (various impressions) of our character – physical or mental – that throughout time the characters/bundle change, the self cannot be persistent; as he mentioned in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, 'nothing but a bundle or collection of different perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement'. He believes that humans generally fall into the trap of inferring self, meaning that the self humans argue is simply a few recurring characteristics that we believe to be the true self. Yet the true self is the objective self that is defined by arbitrary truth. We misunderstand the two because humans generally fail to incorporate the concept of change – we constantly change throughout the passing of time; and the subconscious will to define ourselves.

In order to understand the inferred self and the true self, it is necessary to point to the deciding factor of "true". Descartes believes that we rely on our senses to view the world, but since our senses are deceivable, they are unreliable. Descartes would arguably agree more to this experiment than John Locke. Since Decart believes we live inside our minds, therefore the truth is whatever the mind informs the "self", in other words, what we think is who we are; everyone has a different interpretation of the events that happened in their lives, so the event

doesn't matter. The true component of the self lies in our perception of the event. In double meditation, the Cartesian soul is a non-existent entity, also non-existent (*res cogitans*). The Cartesian spirit is a part of the true soul. Decart distinguished the spirit from the body in part to establish the fact that the soul (that is – immortal), which opens up the possibility of establishing the immortality of the soul, since it implies the idea that the decomposition of the body does not mean the destruction of the soul.

This raises the question of what is reality, and how we can perceive reality. He explains "Cognito ergo sum" – I think therefore I am – meaning that only the act of thinking about one's existence is evidence of the presence of mind that is distinct from the body, which we cannot prove to be reality. From this theory, we can infer that truth only exists in our minds, so as humans we are unable to comprehend objective truth. No matter the true self or the inferred self, are two explanations of the self, so both must be derived from the *self*. Therefore if there is no objective self, then to us the only true self is the inferred self. The objective we speak about is an inferred self.

Locke, on the other hand, rejects the ideas in human nature, John Locke disagreed that some knowledge is innate. Moreover, Locke believed in broadly equivalent knowledge, rather than knowledge based on foundations. preview. In his book *An Essays Concerning Human Understanding*, Locke clarified that thinking relies heavily on the senses and reflection. Moreover, he concluded by saying that all ideas are born from reflection and observation. Knowledge is therefore based on experience.

Different philosophers have distinct take on the footstone of identity: Hobbes believes that it is the bundle of character; Locke believes that is it memory – thus a person's identity is not rooted in static or unchanging characteristics. Instead, it arises from a dynamic interplay of various factors that happens due to our unique experience. He considered the self to be founded on consciousness (*viz.* memory) and not on the bundle of characteristics that are impressions of the body or soul; Descartes believes that it is the mind; Epitetus believes it's prohairesis – judgment that differentiates human beings from animals. It is an important factor that defines the self, since it breaks away from

natural instincts present in all living beings, prioritizing the uniqueness of the mind. It is widely understood to be an argument against the persistence of self.

To explain this there are three key concepts to clarify: The concept of forever passing time, and the non existing present; what is “change” – how can we define the concept of “same”; or how is the inferred self different from the true self.

Descartes views time as a component of movement and influences that coordinates his set of basic conservation principles and laws; more importantly he believes that time is the most systematic discussion and assumes that time is reducible to both thought and movement. He makes the point that time only exists in the heads of human beings, therefore even though we follow a universal standard, every person feels time differently. On the other hand, Hume makes the assertion that “time is nothing but the manner in which some real objects exist” (T 1.2. 5.28). For many people, they use the past to build the future as a way to control the future. In both cases, the future happens after the past, as long as this truth continues then the future is always affected by the past. Just as the world now is affected by the world from last second, last minute, last year, last decade, century, stretching to the conceptual beginning of time. As we humans are present in time, our identity develops in the same way. The transformation in self is built up like how the past is built up, it does not make the self different.

In the quote “we never step in the same river twice” (Heraclitus) widely used to reminisce failed attempts to relive the past, it describes the forever changing of beings. So our standard to measure the changes (time) is also forever passing. So the only invariant is that we are forever changing. In other words, in order to stay unchanged requires being different. To clarify, we can use the concept of consistency, meaning that the two beings across time agree with each other. Imagine planting a small sapling in your garden. After several decades, it has grown into a mature tree. The tree’s appearance and character have changed dramatically. In this case, to Humes, the sapling and the tree are different. However, the sapling agrees with the tree in terms of continuous development, adaptation, and change. Despite striking differences in appearance,

size, and function, they are linked by an unbroken continuum of change. The sapling lays the foundation for the tree, while the tree embodies the initial potential of the sapling.

Thus it’s impossible to use the concept of *sameness* for Hume to define the world we live in because it is an imaginary concept. You may then ask the question – how did humans create this concept? The answer is parallel to Hume’s definition of the inferred self. Since humans are an insignificant existence in the continuum of time, we observe nature (other long lasting objects) as unchanging, it is only a tool used to define our perception of the world; therefore true sameness is constant change. The *true self* is a concept we believe in but is actually the *inferred self*, similar to our limited understanding of *sameness*.

So what is “change”? What is its relation to “same”?

If we claim that x and y are qualitatively identical, we are asserting that x closely resembles y in every aspect. On the other hand, stating that x and y are numerically identical implies that they are not two separate entities but one. The question of whether x and y can share every quality while not being numerically identical is a topic of debate. However, it appears possible for x and y to be numerically identical while lacking qualitative identity, insofar as they may possess different qualities at different points in time.

Then A and B can only be the same entity if they share all properties, qualities, and characteristics completely, without any variation or distinction. Yet, there are many ways to determine if two objects are the same. For example, one could argue that two bananas are the same since they belong to the category “banana”. At the same time, one could argue that they are two separate objects, despite their shared characteristics. To resolve this problem, I will introduce two terms to categorize the concept of the “same”.

According to numerical identity, A and B are not two separate entities but one entity capable of representing different qualities at different times. By this definition, the core of one’s self remains unchanged over time, irrespective of external circumstances or personal growth. Furthermore, this definition enables a view of the self as a fixed and singular entity, defined by its numeri-

cal identity (As argued previously – sameness is constant change – yet to answer the question of change in relation to identity, it is important to understand different types of changes we experience. According to Aristotle, there are two types of changes that form our consciousness/memory: substantial change and accidental change. Substantial change is purposeful changes made that are manipulated by the existing self. In short, it is the decisions made by the self to develop the self. So it is consistent. Accidental changes are denotation – changes indirectly made by the self. They may appear to be a factor that intervenes with the development of self, it is unavoidable by all beings. Therefore it is a common factor, therefore is relatively insignificant). It implies that the individual remains the same entity throughout his or her life, regardless of changes in beliefs, experiences, or qualities. It disregards the fluid nature of personal identity and the potential for personal transformation and growth.

This concept leads us to ask: what consists of the self?

It is common to believe that a human is able to experience a complete transformation. For example, in the novel *Steppenwolf* – on a personal transition of the character: Harry Haller begins the novel being a superficial Dionysian (people who relate solely to sensual and emotional aspects of human nature) who is misanthropic and cynical; he locks his mind in a cage, consisting solely of writing, reading, and endless loneliness. As he reaches the extreme of his lifestyle through meeting Hermine, who introduces influences such as dancing, music, and alcohol, Harry eventually discovers his free self. He did so by killing his previous hypocritical self, thus creating his true self. In this novel, transformation is the main component of self. Even though this is a clear example of how one develops, it does not bring forth the idea that only by killing previous false selves can one discover their destiny. On the contrary, it proves how we gradually build our identity through our thoughts and experience. Pushing this a step forward, it can be inferred that we do not decide the self, instead we discover the self by making decisions that lead us infinitely closer. Therefore judgment that makes up the self is a direct access to understanding ourselves. For example, in Augustine's *Confessions*, the

narrator develops from self presentation to self realization by communicating to God, which is arguably his inner soul.

Therefore, to prove that there is an inner core different among all beings in this world, imagine a theoretical experiment. If a certain number of people are each put into a "The Truman Show", where all details they experience from the moment of birth are planned to be the exact same. After years of experiment, would they turn out to be the same person? The answer is an apparent no. Many real life examples prove that people of similar background can live a completely different lifestyle. The subject's emotional reactions, perspective, processing of information, and inner experience are all different; these all originate from a unique system, and this system creates the inner core of a human being. The system can gradually build up due to new experiences, but cannot be fundamentally altered. The fact that each one has their own self-consciousness would for Locke and Descartes distinguish them, though they have the same experiences.

Exceptions

Using studies such as: childhood abuse directly carries mental disorders on to adult life, to collect evidence and prove the constant self is inaccurate. This is because memories can be deceived; the true traumatic experience may be filtered through the brain's self-protection mechanism, leaving many details inaccurate. There's also the problem of biased admission. A retrospective study of anxious adults might reveal that many of them grew up with divorced parents, but what about the many divorced children who did not develop anxiety and therefore never participated in the study? It is difficult to determine the true importance of a single factor in retrospective studies.

During the condition of amnesia, previously formed connections are maintained in the patient's brain, even though he/she may not be using them. Therefore many may argue that one does not have a sense of personal identity, or a drastic change in personal identity. Yet, while Locke believes memory is important, the function memory plays is mainly in someone's subconsciousness. In this case, the specific event is blocked from a patient,

meaning he/she cannot actively recall the incident, but this doesn't mean it's not a part of the memory system, in fact, memories as such function strongly when making subconscious decisions, causing active results in one's life. Therefore, Locke would say a person with amnesia would be a completely different person, for all his consciousness – the only factor that can determine the self – is lost.

Conclusion

As Tom Joads leaves his family to pursue a heroic journey, he faces a new phase of his life; nevertheless, the memories from Oklahoma

and the journey to California will constantly affect this phase. While Hume may argue that he developed a new aspect of his bundle personality, Locke and Descartes, though through different lenses, argue that it is the past self that decides his present actions. We are persistent throughout our span of time, for changes in personality, physical appearance, and all sections of a full human being does not change the entirety of our existence. Traces of such concepts can be found when a person is making decisions in life, in many cases, the strong sense of destiny in life may be present due to this exact reason.

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