

Chapter 4: Identity

Everyone has a conviction of his own identity as far back as his memory reaches; this conviction doesn't need help from philosophy to strengthen it, and no philosophy can weaken it without first producing some degree of insanity.

The philosopher, however, may very properly regard this conviction as a fact about human nature that is worth attending to. If he can discover its cause, that will add something to his stock of knowledge. If not, ·i.e. if *no-one* can discover its cause·, the conviction of one's own identity must be regarded as either •a part of our original constitution or •something produced by that constitution in a manner unknown to us.

First point: this conviction ·of one's own identity· is utterly necessary for all exercise of reason. The operations of reason—whether practical reasoning about what to do or speculative reasoning in the building up of a theory—are made up of successive parts. In any reasoning that I perform, the early parts are the foundation of the later ones, and if I didn't have the conviction that the early parts are propositions that *I* have approved or written down, I would have no reason to proceed to the later parts in any theoretical or practical project whatever.

I can't remember a past event without being sure that I existed at the time remembered. There may be good arguments to convince me that I existed before the earliest thing I can remember; but to suppose that my memory reaches a moment further back than my belief in my own existence is a contradiction.

The moment a man loses this conviction, . . . past things are done away with, and in his own belief *that* is the moment when he begins to exist. Whatever was thought or said or

done or undergone before that period may belong to some other person; but he can never attribute it to himself, or act in any way that supposes it to be his doing.

That clearly shows us that we must have the conviction of our own continued existence and identity as soon as we are capable of *thinking or doing anything on account of what we have thought or done or undergone before*—i.e. as soon as we are reasonable creatures.

Let us consider •what is meant by 'identity' in general, •what is meant by 'our own personal identity', and •how we are led into the irresistible belief and conviction that everyone has of his own personal identity as far as his memory reaches. These are appropriate things to look into if we want to form as clear a notion as we can of this phenomenon of the human mind.

Identity in general I take to be a relation between a thing known to exist at one time and a thing known to have existed at another time. If you ask whether they are one and the same or two different things—for example, 'Is the professor who persuaded you to take the course the one who gave you an F in it?'—everyone of common sense understands perfectly what your question means. So we can be certain that everyone of common sense has a clear and distinct notion of identity.

If you ask for a definition of identity, I confess that I can't give one; it is too simple a notion to admit of logical definition. [For Reid's linking of 'logical definition' to simplicity, see the first two pages of Essay 1, chapter 1.] I can say that it is a *relation*, but I can't find words in which to say what marks identity off from other relations, though I'm in no danger of confusing it with any other! I can say that *diversity* is a

contrary relation, and that similarity and dissimilarity are another pair of contrary relations, which everyone easily distinguishes, conceptually, from identity and diversity.

I see evidently that identity requires an uninterrupted continuance of existence. Something that stops existing can't be the same thing as something that begins to exist at a later time; for this would be to suppose that

- a thing existed after it had stopped existing, and
- existed before it was produced,

and these are both manifest contradictions. Continued uninterrupted existence is therefore necessarily implied in identity.

From this we can infer that identity can't properly be applied to our pains, our pleasures, our thoughts, or any operation of our minds. The pain I feel today is not *the same individual pain* that I felt yesterday, though they may be similar in kind and degree, and may have the same cause. This holds for every feeling and for every mental operation. They are all successive in their nature, like time itself, no two moments of which can be the same moment.

It's not like that with the parts of absolute space. They always are, were, and will be the same. Up to this point I think we are on safe ground in our moves towards fixing the notion of identity in general.

It is perhaps harder to ascertain precisely the meaning of *personhood*, but for the present topic we don't need to. For our present purpose, all that matters is that all mankind place their personhood in something that can't be divided or consist of parts. A *part of a person* is an obvious absurdity.

When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person and has lost nothing of his personhood—i.e. he is just as much *a person* as he was before. If he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person that he was before. The amputated limb is no part

of his person; if it were, it would have a right to a part of his estate, and be liable for a part of his debts! It would be entitled to a share of his merit and demerit—which is plainly absurd. A person is something indivisible; it is what Leibniz called a 'monad'.

My personal identity, therefore, implies the continued existence of that indivisible thing that I call *myself*. Whatever this *self* may be, it is something that thinks and wonders what to do and decides and acts and is acted on. I am not thought; I am not action; I am not feeling; I am something that thinks and acts and feels. My thoughts and actions and feelings change every moment; rather than lasting through time they occur in a series; but the *self* or *I* to which they belong is permanent, and relates in exactly the same way to all the successive thoughts, actions, and feelings that I call *mine*. These are the notions that I have of my personal identity. You may want to object:

All this may be imagined, not real. How do you know—what evidence do you have—that there *is* such a permanent self that has a claim to all the thoughts, actions, and feelings that you call yours?

I answer that the proper evidence I have of all this is *remembering*. I remember that twenty years ago I had a conversation with Dr Stewart; I remember several things that happened in that conversation; my memory testifies not only that this was done but that it was done *by me* who now remember it. If it was done by me, I must have existed at that time, and continued to exist from then until now. If the very same person that I call *myself* didn't have a part in that conversation, my memory is deceptive—it gives clear and positive testimony of something that isn't true. Everyone in his right mind believes what he clearly remembers, and everything he remembers convinces him that he existed at the time remembered.

Although •memory gives the most irresistible evidence of my being the same person who did such-and-such a thing at such-and-such a time, I may have •other good evidence of things that happened to me and that I don't remember. I know who gave birth to me and fed me at her breast, but I don't remember these events.

What makes it the case that I was the person who did such-and-such is not my remembering doing it. My remembering doing it makes me know for sure that I did it; but I could have done it without remembering it. The *relation to me* that is expressed by saying 'I did it' would be the same even if I hadn't the least memory of doing it. This thesis:

•My remembering that I did such-and-such—or, as some choose to express it, my being 'conscious that' I did it—*makes it the case that* •I did do it

seems to me as great an absurdity as this:

•My believing that the world was created *makes it the case that* •it was created!

The point I'm making in this paragraph would have been unnecessary if some great philosophers hadn't contradicted it.

When we pass judgment on the identity of people other than ourselves, we go by other evidence and decide on the basis of various factors that sometimes produce the firmest assurance and sometimes leave room for doubt. The identity of persons has often been the subject of serious litigation in courts of law. But no-one in his right mind ever had doubts about his own identity as far as he clearly remembered.

The identity of a person is a perfect identity: wherever it is real, it doesn't admit of degrees—it is impossible that a person should be partly the same and partly different, because a person is a *monad* [Reid's word] and isn't divisible into parts. Our *evidence for* the identity of other people does indeed admit of all degrees: we can be absolutely certain

•that this is Martin Guerre• or think there is just a faint chance •that this is Martin Guerre•, or anything in between those extremes. But still it is true that the same person is perfectly the same, and can't be partly the same or fairly much the same. . . .

We probably at first derive our notion of identity from the natural conviction that everyone has had, from the dawn of reason, of his own identity and continued existence. The •operations of our minds are all successive, and have no continued existence. But the •thinking being has a continuous existence, and we have an irresistible belief that it remains the same through all the changes in its thoughts and operations.

Our judgments about the identity of objects of sense seem to be based on much the same kind of evidence as our judgments about the identity of other people.

Wherever we observe great •similarity we are apt to presume •identity, if no reason appears to the contrary. When two objects are perceived at the same time, they can't be *one* object, however alike they may be. But if they are presented to our senses at different times, we are apt to think them the same, merely because of their similarity.

Whether this is a natural prejudice, or whatever its cause is, it certainly appears in children from infancy; and when we grow up it is confirmed in most instances by experience. For we rarely find two individuals of the same species that are not distinguishable by obvious differences.

When a man challenges a thief whom he finds in possession of his watch, he goes purely by similarity—'This *looks like* my watch'. When the watchmaker swears that he sold that watch to this person, his testimony is based on similarity. The testimony of witnesses to the identity of a person is commonly grounded on no evidence except similarity.

Thus it appears that •the evidence we have of *our own* identity as far back as we remember is of a totally different kind from •the evidence we have for the identity of other persons or of perceptible objects. The •former is based on memory, and gives undoubted certainty. The •latter is based on similarity and on other facts that are often not so decisive as to leave no room for doubt.

The identity of perceptible objects is never perfect. All bodies have countless parts that can be separated from them by various causes; so they are subject to continual changes of their substance—increasing, diminishing, changing insensibly •by gaining or losing very small parts•. When something alters thus *gradually*, it keeps the same name (because language couldn't afford a different name for every different state of such a changing being) and is considered as the same thing. Thus we see an old regiment marching past and we say that *it* fought at Poitiers a century ago, although no-one now alive belonged to it then. We say a tree is the same in the seed-bed and in the forest. A warship that has successively changed its tackle, sails, masts, planks, and timbers, while keeping the same name, is the same.

Thus, the identity that we ascribe to bodies—whether natural or artificial—isn't perfect identity; it is rather something which for convenience of speech we *call* identity. It admits of a great change of the subject, as long as the change is gradual, and sometimes even a total change. •For example, we might say 'This is the ship that turned the tide of battle off Cadiz in 1645', although *every* part of the ship had been replaced, a little at a time•. How do the changes that ordinary language allows as consistent with •identity differ from those that are thought to destroy •it? They don't differ in kind, but only in number and degree. •For example, it might fail to count as 'the same ship' because the total turn-over of planks, masts etc. happened *too quickly*—which is a matter of degree, not of kind•. Identity has no fixed nature when applied to •bodies; and questions about the identity of a body are very often questions about words. But identity when applied to •persons has no ambiguity and doesn't admit of degrees, or of more and less. It is the basis for all rights and obligations, and for all accountability, and the notion of it is fixed and precise.

Chapter 5: Locke's account of the origin of our ideas, especially the idea of duration

It was a very laudable attempt of Locke's 'to enquire into the origins of those ideas, notions, or whatever you please to call them, that a man observes and is conscious of having in his mind, and into how the understanding comes to be furnished with them'. No man was better qualified for this investigation, and no man, I think, ever engaged in it with a

more sincere love of truth.

He had considerable success in this, but I think he'd have had even more if he hadn't too early formed a system or hypothesis on this subject, without all the caution and patient induction that is necessary in drawing general conclusions from facts.