
Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man

Of Identity

Thomas Reid

Introduction: Thomas Reid was born in 1710 in Strachan, Scotland. He attended Marischal College at the University of Aberdeen, graduating in 1726. He then studied theology for several years and in 1732 became a Clerk of the Presbytery in the Presbyterian Church. The following year Reid became the librarian at Marischal College—a position that gave him the opportunity to pursue his scholarly interests, especially in the field of mathematics. In 1736 he resigned his job and traveled in England. After returning to Scotland in 1737, he accepted an appointment as pastor in New Machar, a town near Aberdeen. During this time he continued his philosophical studies, concentrating on problems of perception. In 1751 Reid became a professor of philosophy at King’s College at the University of Aberdeen. There he founded the Aberdeen Philosophical Society, whose members presented and discussed papers on various topics. In 1764 he accepted an appointment as Professor of Moral Philosophy at the University of Glasgow. In 1780 he resigned his professorship in order to devote himself to full-time writing. Reid died in Glasgow in 1796.

Reid’s works include *An Inquiry into the Human Mind on the Principles of Common Sense* (1764), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), and *Essays on the Active Powers of Man* (1788).

Our reading is the chapter of *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* entitled “Of Identity,” which examines the notion of personal identity. Reid does not attempt to define either of the two terms in this phrase, “person” (“personality”) or “identity.” He holds that to explain the meaning of personal identity it suffices to note that a *person* has no parts and thus cannot be divided, and that *identity* implies that the same thing continues to exist over time. Personal identity, accordingly, can be defined as “the continued existence of that indivisible thing which I call myself.”

We all have a commonsense belief in our personal identity, but is this belief philosophically justifiable? Is there a continuing “self”? Reid argues that belief in personal identity is justified by the phenomenon of memory: Since we remember

things we did in the past, we must have continued to exist from that past time to the present time. Reid contrasts the identity of persons with the identity of material things. Persons have *perfect identity*, a kind of identity that is complete and admits of no degrees (since a person is indivisible, a person cannot, over time, be partly the same and partly different). Material things, over time, have only *imperfect identity*, a kind of identity that is not complete and admits of degrees. Reid concludes by noting that personal identity is “the foundation of all rights and obligations, and of all accountableness.”

—Donald Abel

Essay III: Of Memory

Chapter 4: Of Identity The conviction which every man has of his identity, as far back as his memory reaches, needs no aid of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it, without first producing some degree of insanity.

The philosopher, however, may very properly consider this conviction as a phenomenon of human nature worthy of his attention. If he can discover its cause, an addition is made to his stock of knowledge. If not, it must be held as a part of our original constitution, or an effect of that constitution produced in a manner unknown to us.

We may observe, first of all, that this conviction is indispensably necessary to all exercise of reason. The operations of reason, whether in action or in speculation, are made up of successive parts. The antecedent are the foundation of the consequent, and, without the conviction that the antecedent have been seen or done by me, I could have no reason to proceed to the consequent in any speculation or in any active project whatever.

There can be no memory of what is past without the conviction that we 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 farther back than my belief and conviction of my existence, is a contradiction.

The moment a man loses this conviction, as if he had drunk the water of Lethe,¹ past things are done away and, in his own belief, he then begins to exist. Whatever was thought or said or done or suffered before that period, may belong to some other person; but he can never impute it to himself, or take any subsequent step that supposes it to be his doing.

From this it is evident 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 suffered before—that is, as soon as we are reasonable creatures.

That we may form as distinct a notion as we are able of this phenomenon of the human mind, it is proper to consider what is meant by identity in general, what by our own personal identity, and how we are led into that invincible belief and conviction which every man has of his own personal identity, as far as his memory reaches.

Identity in general, I take to be a relation between a thing which is known to exist at one time, and a thing which is known to have existed at another time. If you ask whether they are one and the same, or two different things, every man of common sense understands the meaning of your question perfectly. Whence we may infer with certainty that every man of common sense has a clear and distinct notion of identity.

If you ask a definition of identity, I confess I can give none; it is too simple a notion to admit of logical definition. I can say it is a relation, but I cannot find words to express the specific difference between this and other relations, though I am in no danger of confounding it with any other. I can say that diversity is a contrary relation, and that similitude and dissimilitude are another couple of contrary relations, which every man easily distinguishes in his conception from identity and diversity.

I see evidently that identity supposes an uninterrupted continuance of existence. That which has ceased to exist cannot be the same with that which afterwards begins to exist; for this would be to suppose a being to exist after it ceased to exist, and to have had existence before it was produced, which are manifest contradictions. Continued uninterrupted existence is therefore necessarily implied in identity.

Hence we may infer that identity cannot, in its proper sense, be applied to our pains, our pleasures, our thoughts, or any operation of our minds. The pain felt this day is not the same individual pain which I felt yesterday, though they may be similar in kind and degree, and have the same cause. The same may be said of every feeling and of every operation of mind: they are all successive in their nature, like time itself, no two moments of which can be the same moment.

It is otherwise with the parts of absolute space. They always are, and were, and will be the same. So far, I think, we proceed upon clear ground in fixing the notion of identity in general.

It is, perhaps, more difficult to ascertain with precision the meaning of personality, but it is not necessary in the present subject. It is sufficient for our purpose to observe that all mankind place their personality in something that cannot be divided, or consist of parts. A part of a person is a manifest absurdity.

When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person and has lost nothing of his personality. If

he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person he was before. The amputated member is no part of his person; otherwise it would have a right to a part of his estate and be liable for a part of his engagements; it would be entitled to a share of his merit and demerit—which is manifestly absurd. A person is something indivisible—and is what Leibniz² calls a *monad*.

My personal identity, therefore, implies the continued existence of that indivisible thing which I call myself. Whatever this self may be, it is something which thinks and deliberates and resolves and acts and suffers. I am not thought, I am not action, I am not feeling; I am something that thinks and acts and suffers. My thoughts and actions and feelings change every moment—they have no continued, but a successive existence. But that *self* or *I* to which they belong is permanent, and has the same relation to all the succeeding thoughts, actions, and feelings which I call mine.

Such are the notions that I have of my personal identity. But perhaps it may be said, this may all be fancy without reality. How do you know? What evidence have you that there is such a permanent self which has a claim to all the thoughts, actions, and feelings, which you call yours?

To this I answer that the proper evidence I have of all this is remembrance. I remember that twenty years ago, I conversed with such a person; I remember several things that passed 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 that time to the present. If the identical person whom I call myself, had not a part in that conversation, my memory is fallacious—it gives a distinct and positive testimony of what is not true. Every man in his senses believes what he distinctly 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 identical person that did such a thing, at such a time, I may have other good evidence of things which befell me, and which I do not remember: I know who bore me and suckled me, but I do not remember these events.

It may here be observed (though the observation would have been unnecessary if some great philosophers had not contradicted it) that it is not my remembering any action of mine that makes me to be the person who did it. This remembrance makes me to know assuredly that I did it, but I might have done it though I did not remember it. That relation to me, which is expressed by saying that I did it, would be the same though I had not the least remembrance of it. To say that my remembering that I did such a thing, or, as some choose to express it, my being conscious that I did it, makes me to have done it, appears to me as great an absurdity as it would be to say that my belief that the world was created made it to be created.

When we pass judgment on the identity of other persons besides ourselves, we proceed upon other grounds and determine from a variety of circumstances, which sometimes produce the firmest assurance and sometimes leave room for doubt. The identity of persons has often furnished matter of serious litigation before tribunals of justice. But no man of a sound mind ever doubted of his own identity, as far as he distinctly remembered.

The identity of a person is a perfect identity: wherever it is real, it admits of no degrees; and it is impossible that a person should be in part the same and in part different, because a person is a monad and is not divisible into parts. The evidence of identity in other persons besides ourselves does indeed admit of all degrees, from what we account certainty to the least degree of probability. But still it is true that the same person is perfectly the same, and cannot be so in part or in some degree only.

For this cause, I have first considered personal identity, as that which is perfect in its kind and the natural measure of that which is imperfect.

We probably at first derive our notion of identity from that natural conviction which every man has 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 continued existence, and we have an invincible belief that it remains the same when all its thoughts and operations change.

Our judgments of the identity of objects of sense seem to be formed much upon the same grounds as our judgments of the identity of other persons besides ourselves.

Wherever we observe great similarity, we are apt to presume identity, if no reason appears to the contrary. Two objects ever so like, when they are perceived at the same time, cannot be the same; but if they are presented to our senses at different times, we are apt to think them the same, merely from their similarity.

Whether this be a natural prejudice, or from whatever cause it proceeds, 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.

A man challenges a thief whom he finds in possession of his horse or his watch, only on similarity. When the watchmaker swears that he sold this watch to such a person, his testimony is grounded on similarity. The testimony of witnesses to the identity of a person is commonly grounded on no other evidence.

Thus it appears that the evidence we have of our own identity, as far back as we remember, is totally of a different kind from the evidence we have of the identity of other persons or of objects of sense. The first is grounded on memory and gives un-

doubted certainty. The last is grounded on similarity and on other circumstances, which in many cases are not so decisive as to leave no room for doubt.

It may likewise be observed that the identity of objects of sense is never perfect. All bodies, as they consist of innumerable parts that may be disjoined from them by a great variety of causes, are subject to continual changes of their substance—increasing, diminishing, changing insensibly.³ When such alterations are gradual, because language could not afford a different name for every different state of such a changeable being, it retains the same name and is considered as the same thing. Thus we say of an old regiment that it did such a thing a century ago, though there now is not a man alive who then belonged to it. We say a tree is the same in the seedbed and in the forest. A ship of war which has successively changed her anchors, her tackle, her sails, her masts, her planks, and her timbers, while she keeps the same name, is the same.

The identity, therefore, which we ascribe to bodies, whether natural or artificial, is not perfect identity; it is rather something which, for the conveniency of speech, we call identity. It admits of a great change of the subject, providing the change be gradual—sometimes even of a total change. And the changes which in common language are made consistent with identity, differ from those that are thought to destroy it, not in kind but in number and degree. It 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 admits not of degrees or of more and less. It is the foundation of all rights and obligations, and of all accountability; and the notion of it is fixed and precise.

NOTES

1. *Lethe*: in Greek mythology, a river in Hades, the abode of the dead. When the dead drink its waters, they forget their past existence. [D.C.A., ed.]
2. Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716) was a German philosopher and mathematician. [D.C.A.]
3. *insensibly*: in a way that cannot be sensed [D.C.A.]

Reproduced from *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man in The Works of Thomas Reid, D.D.*, edited by William Hamilton, 7th Ed., Vol. 1 (updated stylistically by D. C. Abel). Maclachlan & Stewart, 1872.