Locke's And Hume's Views On Self And Personal Identity

Introduction

In the 17th and 18th century Britain had a diverse number of philosophers especially the Platonist kind. However, as scientific innovation became advanced modern philosophy began to encounter a shift. This was a paradigm shift that acknowledged that knowledge was gained primarily through the five senses. The foundation for obtaining knowledge was anchored in direct experience. This was referred to as empiricism.

At the beginning of the 18th century three major philosophers Locke, Berkeley, and Hume brought forth arguments that supported this approach. These three philosophers gave rise to what was to be referred to as empiricism. empiricism in contrast to rationalist 17th century continental Europe philosophers refuted the innate ideas and deduction during the search for knowledge. They were of the school of thought that knowledge fundamentally was attained direct experience and inductive reasoning.

This essay will focus on Locke and Hume. The writer attempts to give definitions of personal identity according to both philosophers. Furthermore, the author will attempt to compare and contrast the arguments raised by both philosophers.

At the very end, the author will deliver a personal opinion on which philosophers' argument carries the day.

Hume's definition of personal identity

Hume defines a "perfect identity" as a strict numerical one to one relation. He further goes to state that if the perception is unchanging and uninterrupted perfect identity between perception and an object will hold. Hume much later concludes that identity is an illusion due to our inability to have any unchanging and uninterrupted perceptions through time.

Hume is of the argument that the idea of identity cannot be achieved by observing only one object but only that of unity. Therefore by identity, to reference our object, we would need another object. This makes Hume introduce the use of numbers. While he does so, he further alludes that numbers are insufficient to convey identity as they would bring the notion that we are comparing different objects. This raises a challenge, we have an idea of unity and that of numbers, but none gives an idea of identity. This makes Hume conclude that the identity line is at a point between unity and numbers.

When we observe an object we get the idea of unity, observing the same object at a later date gives the idea of numbers. Linking the idea of unity and the idea of numbers makes us conclude we have been viewing the same object.

Locke's definition of personal identity

John Locke in An Essay Concerning Human Understanding alludes that personal identity goes as far as an individual's consciousness. It is this connection between consciousness and the memory that that gave rise to "memory theory of identity." Locke goes ahead to suggest that the self is intelligent and capable of thinking, reasoning, reflecting, view itself as itself in different places at different times. Locke reaffirms that in the self is an aspect of continuation. The succession of impressions creates the illusion that succession is being experienced by a continuing subject. (Treatise 1.4.6)

Locke thus defines personal identity as "the sameness of a rational being." From this definition, we can say that any change in in the self will constitute a change in personal identity and vice versa. It is on the strength of this definition that John Locke alludes that personal identity goes as far as one's consciousness. He goes further to say that the self is a 'thinking thing." Thinking is accompanied by being conscious. It is this consciousness that has often been equated with memory. Locke is of the opinion that consciousness can be backdated to a past thought or action enabling the identification of a person to be deduced. Locke says one can remember an experience because they had that experience and the reverse of the same argument is true. One cannot remember what they were not part of.

Using the famed analogy of the prince and the cobbler, Locke argues that if these two unique individuals swapped bodies, the persona will take up the consciousness and the mind will inhabit the body. Bearing in mind the two are members of the society, the personal identity and realization or awareness that comes with the inhabitation of a new body is only alive to both of them. To the rest of the society, the prince is still a prince and the cobbler still a cobbler. Therefore it is true to say that personal identity is completely independent of our physical environments. Personal identity has nothing to do with the person but has everything to do with the man. Back to the analogy of the prince and the cobbler, if the two swap bodies, the prince will be behaving like the cobbler used to behave and vice versa.

How can we compare and contrast the two?

Hume and Locke have two related differences, their points of focus and the conceptualization of science. Locke embraces the newly found knowledge experimental science is providing. He is interested in the theory of knowledge with regards to its methods, validity, and scope, and the distinction between justified belief and opinion. He, however, takes a majority of it for granted taking Newton's corpuscular theory on its face value. Locke even goes further to coin, "philosophy is the handmaiden of sciences," from "philosophy is the handmaiden of theology."

In retrospect, Hume focuses on human nature and precisely the human reason. It is the human reason that he wishes to subject to, 'scientific method' initially. Thereafter a decision will be made on what science can or cannot provide and how whatever science provides can be properly understood.

The initial analysis of human faculties by Hume makes him skeptical about their fruits than Locke. He repulses the idea of "innate capacity to reason." His analysis of human sensory input relegates Locke 'unities' to 'bundles of perception' summed up together by periodic repetitiveness. Hume, however, identifies mathematics as more trustworthy because it covers relationships between ideas and not matters of fact. This is a sharp contrast to Locke who argues it is inappropriate for empirical sciences.

How did they imagine that the self was different from the brain or different from the mind?

The theory of experiencing cause which Locke advocates for is rejected by Hume. Hume contends the self cannot feel the connection between the mind and the arm. Therefore the self cannot sense the muscular contraction that results in the movement of the arm. He reckons a synthetic can be used to define unobservable things realistically. He used the analogy of a billiard ball to explain this. Ball A is hit towards ball B. the collision between ball A and ball B causes ball B to move. This movement cannot be experienced thus there is no observable connection between the two. Moreover, there is no certainty that the collision between the two balls will result in the movement of ball B each time. Ball A could as well bounce off in any random direction. Hume is convinced that one cannot with certainty know the outcome of an event without perceiving its cause.

Locke believes that all knowledge is a derivative of the senses which are then transformed into impressions. Impressions will give rise to ideas which can be simple or complex. Ideas that involve one sense whereas complex ideas are derived from a combination of many simple ideas. Locke reaffirms that before the mind has thought of anything sensation should be foremost. At the same time when the basic raw materials for sensation have been supplied, a totally independent power called reflection is re-ignited. The relationship between reflection and sensation is not directly a casual one.

Whom does the author prefer?

Both thinkers present very strong arguments but I tend to associate myself more with Hume. I find him more assertive and consistent. Moreover, I feel Hume is less compromising, adopting a tougher stance than Locke. This is not to be taken that Locke is timid. Even though does not draw Hume`s conclusions are sounder than the approach adopted by Locke. The idea of a systematic development of complex ideas from an experience too appealing to ignore. Furthermore, our ideas will never be infinitely divided. We just do not have the ability to comprehend infinite divisibility.

References

1. The Empiricists: Critical Essays on Locke, Berkeley, and Hume. Margaret Atherton(ed)- 1998- Rowan & Littlefield Publishers.