

Locke on People and Substances

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1: The problem

In the famous chapter on identity in the *Essay* (II.xxvii), Locke notoriously denies that sameness of substance is either necessary or sufficient for sameness of person. In thus denying that the identity of a person is determined by ‘unity of substance’, Locke denies that a person is a substance. If people were substances of some kind, then for me to be the same person through a stretch a time would just be for me to continue to be the same substance of that sort. And yet through most of the *Essay* the term ‘substance’ is used in a comprehensive contrast with ‘mode’ and ‘relation’: this is, roughly speaking, the trichotomy of thing, property, and relation. If Locke were thinking of substance in this way in the ‘Identity’ chapter, he ought to find it obvious that people are substances, that people are squarely on the *substance* side of the great divide that has substances (things, beings) on one side of it, and modes and relations on the other. Indeed, he not only ought to find it obvious; he does. At the very outset of the treatment of personal identity he writes:

To find wherein *personal Identity* consists, we must consider what *Person* stands for; which, I think, is a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and

reflection, and can consider it self as it self, the same thinking thing in different times and places (sec. 9; 335:9).¹

Surely a *thinking intelligent being* belongs on the list of those items that have properties and stand in relations to things, rather than on the list of properties and relations. And since a person is the same item in different times and places, it passes another standard requirement for substancehood. Thinking of a person in this way, how can Locke suppose that one and the same person can ‘involve’ different substances, and vice versa?

Here is a further compounding of the puzzle. Two sections before the passage just quoted, Locke is setting up that passage by stating a methodological point:

To conceive, and judge of it [identity] aright, we must consider what *Idea* the Word it is applied to stands for: It being one thing to be the same *Substance*, another the same *Man*, and a third the same *Person*, if *Person*, *Man*, and *Substance*, are three Names standing for three different *Ideas*; for such as is the *Idea* belonging to that Name, such must be the *Identity* (sec. 7; 332:24).

¹ References with a colon in them are to page and line of John Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, edited by Peter H. Nidditch (Oxford and New York: The Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1975).

There can be no doubt, of course, that the general idea of *substance* is different from the general idea of *person*. Nevertheless if, as the passage quoted above from section 9 seems clearly to say, the idea of a person is the idea of a certain kind of substance, Locke is left with no possibility of holding that he is the same person as the one who went to Cleves with Sir Walter Vane in 1665 but not the same substance (of the appropriate kind) as Vane's travelling companion.

Thus the problem of this essay. Locke's handling of 'substance' and of 'person' seems clearly to imply that a person is a substance of a certain kind, and he often says as much, outright; this implies that to continue to be the same person is to continue to be the same substance; yet Locke flatly denies this. What is going on?

The problem arises in connection with other kinds of things also, not just with people. In the 'Identity' chapter, Locke firmly declares that to have the same man or the same horse at one time as at an earlier time, one need not have the same substance: 'Animal Identity is preserved in Identity of Life, and not of Substance' (sec. 12; 337:17), he says, citing *man* (333:4) and *horse* (330:24) as examples. Yet only four chapters earlier *man* and *horse* are two of Locke's prime examples of substances (see II.xxiii.3–4; 296:26 and 297:15).

How can this be? Is Locke flatly contradicting himself, or can he be understood in such a way as to make all this consistent?

2: Relative identity

This difficulty was first raised against Locke by Reid, and was reiterated by Shoemaker.¹ But in the voluminous secondary

literature about the 'Identity' chapter the matter seems to have been neglected except by those who take it as evidence that Locke accepted the relative identity thesis, according to which

- (i) the proper form of an identity statement is not 'x is (the same as) y' but rather 'x is the same F as y', and
- (ii) x can be the same F as y without being the same G as y (even if x is a G and y is a G).

This doctrine would let Locke say that we are now listening to the same *person* but not to the same *thinking thing or substance* as we were listening to an hour ago, even though every person is a thinking thing or substance.

We will offer to explain this performance of Locke's quite differently. Our explanation will provide a key to the chapter as a whole, helping to exhibit its real unity and the integral connections that obtain—for better and for worse—among Locke's discussions of oaks, masses of matter, and atoms. The relative identity explanation does not have that virtue.

Even if we did not have that alternative explanation, we would hesitate to credit Locke with accepting the relative identity theory when he does not explicitly express it. Nothing in the 'Identity' chapter comes close to having the form 'x is the same F as y but is not the same G as y', let alone expressing the theory that would license such a statement.

The relative identity explanation has been most fully deployed by Noonan, who points out something else in the chapter that it could also explain.² Regarding masses of matter, Locke is a mereological essentialist:

While two or more Atoms be joined together into the same Mass, . . . the Mass, consisting of the same Atoms, must be the same Mass, or the same Body, let the

¹ Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, edited by B. Brody (Cambridge, Mass.: The M.I.T. Press, 1969), Essay 3, Chapter 6, at p. 356; Sydney S. Shoemaker, *Self-Knowledge and Self-Identity* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1963), pp. 45ff.

² Harold Noonan, 'Locke on Personal Identity', *Philosophy* 53 (1978).

parts be never so differently jumbled; But if one of these Atoms be taken away, or a new one added, it is no longer the same Mass or the same Body (330:14).

He goes on immediately to explain that he does not take the same line about organisms:

In the state of living Creatures, their Identity depends not on a Mass of the same Particles; but on something else. For in them the variation of great parcels of Matter alters not the Identity.

So we have mereological essentialism for masses of matter—which Locke also calls ‘bodies’—but not for animals. Add to that Locke’s subsequent statement that ‘An Animal is a living organized Body’ (332:35) and there is a problem. If an animal is a body, and the same body cannot lose or gain any parts, it should follow that an animal cannot gain or lose any parts; but an animal can do just that, and this is a central theme in the ‘Identity’ chapter. If Locke held the relative identity thesis, on the other hand, he would think it all right to say that animals are bodies and yet *x* may be the same animal as *y* without being the same body as *y*.

But there is another explanation, which is less drastic and closer to the text. It is that Locke uses ‘living body’ with a special sense of its own, in which *living bodies* don’t conform to the mereological essentialism that Locke attributes to *bodies simpliciter*. This special sense is at work in the closing sentence of the very section we have been considering. Locke says there: ‘In these two cases of a Mass of Matter, and a living Body, Identity is not applied to the same thing’ (330:30; see also 331:14, 333:2).

On a few occasions he apparently uses ‘body’ to mean ‘living body’, for example when he speaks of ‘our bodies’, when he asks ‘why the same individual Spirit may not be

united to different Bodies’ (332:9), and when he speaks of ‘the Body of an Animal’ (331:28) and of a metabolizing machine as ‘one continued Body’ (:25). Even in this last case, he could have allowed himself to say ‘living body’, for he does speak of the particles that successively comprise the machine as involved in ‘one Common Life’. If we are right about this part of Locke’s thought, all these uses of ‘body’ are imperfect, but mildly and understandably so.

And there are fewer of them than one might expect. Sometimes when Locke explains ‘animal’ through ‘collection of matter’ or through ‘body’ (not ‘living body’), the topic seems to be, or is explicitly said to be, an animal at an instant. There is no problem there, for Locke can say that an animal is at each instant constituted by a mass of matter. (See 331:5, :10, 332:4, 335:5.)

When Locke says that an animal is a living body, this doesn’t tell us much, because our only handle on ‘living body’ is through his extended account of animals. But how could he—how indeed can we—do better? The whole truth about an animal is a truth about particles or masses of matter, which are somehow more fundamental than animals; so it is natural to think that ‘An animal is. . .’ can be helpfully completed in the language of particles or masses. But how? There seems to be no way, unless we bite the bullet and say with Grandy that an animal is a function from times to particles or masses of matter.¹ Now consider this, the only remaining relevant occurrence of ‘body’ in the early sections of the ‘Identity’ chapter:

’Tis not the *Idea* of a thinking rational Being alone, that makes the *Idea* of a *Man* in most Peoples sense; but of a Body so and so shaped joined to it; and if that be the *Idea of a Man*, the same successive Body

¹ Thus Richard Grandy, ‘Stuff and Things’, in *Mass Terms: Some Philosophical Problems*, edited by F. J. Pelletier, (Dordrecht, The Netherlands: D. Reidel, 1979), pp. 219–227.

not shifted all at once, must as well as the same immaterial Spirit go to the making of the same *Man* (335:3).

We suggest that the awkward, ingenious phrase ‘the same successive body not shifted all at once’ shows Locke straining with the difficulty to which we have referred.

A wrong answer

We return now to our original problem. If Locke is to be made consistent, without help from relative identity, it will presumably be by distinguishing the senses of ‘substance’, or ways of thinking of substance, that are deployed when he asserts and when he denies that a person is a substance.

A natural candidate for this distinction presents itself. At certain points in the *Essay* Locke says that every specific idea of a (kind of) substance contains as one ingredient a ‘supposed or confused’ idea of ‘substance in general’—the idea of *substratum*, something that owns, contains, and supports the qualities of the substance. This is notoriously troublesome, as Locke well knows. By his own standards, the term ‘substratum’ can make sense only if it is backed by an idea of the sort one would have when perceiving an instance of substratum; but there can be no such idea type as that, for our perceptual states depend entirely on the qualities of the perceived things, with nothing left over as the sensory mirror of the substratum that has the qualities. But Locke couldn’t see how else to understand ordinary expressions of the form ‘the thing which is F, G, H. . .’ etc. And so he attributes to us an idea of substratum, spotlighting it as a busy and apparently unavoidable part of our conceptual repertoire, while also condemning it as confused or worse.¹

Now, Locke sometimes uses the ordinary term ‘substance’ to bring in this problematical notion of substratum.² If he were doing that when he says that sameness of person need not involve sameness of substance, the initial puzzle would disappear. Locke’s positive account of what it is for a person to persist is given in terms of unity of ‘consciousness’; whatever in detail that means, it certainly implies that the question of whether the person who is F at t_1 is the person who is G at t_2 depends on some relation between the mental states at t_1 of the person who is F at t_1 and the mental states at t_2 of the person who is G at t_2 ; and Locke, in pushing sameness of substance aside, could be saying that personal identity depends on relations among states without reference to what substratum has or supports them.

There would be good reason for him to say this. The big trouble with the supposed concept of substratum comes from its emptiness: there could not be evidence regarding whether the thoughts of the F-person at t_1 are supported by the same substratum as those of the G-person at t_2 . If sameness of substratum were essential for sameness of person, the result would be that all our affirmations and denials using ‘same person’ would be guesswork. This would be intolerable, because according to Locke our concept of a person is a practically important one, the use of which can have grave consequences for people’s lives. So he is well motivated to insist that the continuation of a person through time does not involve the continuation of a substratum.

This interpretation fits some parts of the chapter well enough. For example, when Locke asserts that there is no obstacle to the very same substance’s being the subject first of one consciousness and then of another, and that a single

¹ For a development of this account, and a defense of this interpretation of Locke’s notion of substratum against the *arriviste* view that it is the notion of a thing’s microscopic constitution, see Jonathan Bennett, ‘Substratum’, *History of Philosophy Quarterly* 4 (1987).

² See for example I.iv.18; II.xxiii.1–6, 37; IV.vi.7.

consciousness might involve a sequence of substances, his confidence about this would be explained if he were deploying the substratum concept. For the emptiness of that concept enables it to jump through any hoops we choose.

Furthermore, as we have already implied, it neatly answers the question of what Locke could mean when he says that a person is a being that thinks, etc., although sameness of person need not involve sameness of substance.

So perhaps it is not surprising that some students of Locke have accepted this, and believed that the notion of substratum is at work in the 'Identity' chapter.¹ But the interpretation is wrong. Some conspicuous facts about the text clash violently with it, and there is another interpretation that makes everything fall into place.

4. Why it is wrong

The best evidence that the 'substratum' notion is not at work in this discussion of Locke's comes from *how* he supports his denial that sameness of person goes with sameness of substance. He does not support it through any thoughts about the emptiness of the concept of substratum, or the impossibility of having any evidence as to whether the person who is F at t_1 involves the same substratum as the person who is G at t_2 . On the contrary, what he actually does would hardly be to the point if substratum were at issue: he breaks the question into two, according to whether the person who asks 'Same person, same substance?' is thinking of material or immaterial substances. His next move makes no sense at all if the question is: 'Same person, same substratum?'; he says that if the question is about material substances then the answer is 'No', for the same reason that the answer to

'Same animal, same substance?' is 'No.' Here are Locke's words:

But the question is, whether if the same Substance, which thinks, be changed, it can be the same Person, or remaining the same it can be different Persons.

And to this I answer, first, this can be no Question at all to those, who place Thought in a purely material, animal, Constitution, void of an immaterial Substance. For, whether their Supposition be true or no, 'tis plain they conceive personal Identity preserved in something else than Identity of Substance; as animal Identity is preserved in Identity of Life, and not of Substance (sec. 12; 337:10).

Locke is saying that the question 'Same person, same substance?' should be answered negatively by anyone who thinks that the identity of people is like that of horses; and in this he is relying on his own discussion of the identity of non-human animals (and of plants, such as oak trees), earlier in the chapter.

In what way is the identity of an animal not a matter of the identity of a substance? How is substance being thought of here? And just how does this carry over to the treatment of personal identity? To these questions we now turn.

5. Atoms and masses

Locke's treatment of the diachronic identity of bodies goes in carefully controlled stages.

It starts with *atoms*. Locke can hardly be said to throw any light on atomic identity. He writes:

Let us suppose an Atom, i.e. a continued body under one immutable Superficies, existing in a determined

¹ The present paper grew out of Alston's curing Bennett of this belief. Another instance of it occurs when O'Connor explains Locke's denial that sameness of person involves sameness of substance as a result of his being 'critical of the concept of substance' (D. J. O'Connor, *John Locke* (Pelican Books, 1952), p. 120).

time and place: 'tis evident, that, considered in any instant of its Existence, it is, in that instant, the same with it self. For being, at that instant, what it is, and nothing else, it is the same, and so must continue, as long as its Existence is continued: for so long it will be the same, and no other (sec. 3; 330:7).

This tells us that an atom continues to be the same atom so long as its existence is continued. Undeniable, but hardly illuminating. For any x whatever, x continues to be the same x so long as x continues to exist. Apart from this truism (and the still idler truth that an atom is identical with itself at an instant), all the passage offers is the suggestion that atoms are marked out by their fixity of size and shape ('a continued body under one immutable Superficies'). As it stands, this is no use at all. Atom x has a certain size and shape at t_1 , and atom y has that very same size and shape at t_2 ; but whether this is a case of one immutable superficies depends on whether x is y , and thus cannot help us to determine whether x is y .

If Locke means fixity of size and shape only to be necessary and not sufficient for atomic identity, that puts him in the clear; for then the 'immutable superficies' phrase is only part of his account—the part that says that if x ever has a shape or size that y at some time doesn't have, then x is not the same atom as y . This, however, is a modest triumph unless Locke completes the story, presenting other necessary conditions for atomic identity that jointly constitute a sufficient condition. Well, perhaps he is trying to do that too. His phrase 'a continued body', rather than meaning merely 'a body that continues to exist', might mean something about spatiotemporal continuity. That, together with fixity of size and shape, could put Locke on the path towards a true theory of atomic identity. It would, however, be only a tiny first step, and we're not sure that Locke took even that step.

Rather than continue to squeeze this turnip, let's simply assume atomic identity, and see what Locke has to tell us about the identity of more complex entities.

Next he turns to masses of matter, which he takes to be aggregates of atoms. Locke deals with them simply: if x is a mass of matter and y is a mass of matter, then x is y just in case x contains all and only the atoms that y contains. A mass of matter can stand any amount of internal rearrangement, but not the slightest turnover of material:

Whilst they exist united together, the Mass, consisting of the same Atoms, must be the same Mass, or the same Body, let the parts be never so differently jumbled: But if one of these Atoms be taken away, or a new one added, it is no longer the same Mass, or the same Body (sec. 3; 330:16).

In passing, it may be noted that Locke stays away from two hard problems about sameness through time. By rooting his 'Identity' chapter in atomism, Locke escapes having to wrestle with 'same mass of matter' when atomism is not assumed, that is, when it is allowed that matter may be infinitely divisible. And he simply omits to discuss 'same pebble' and 'same island', for which exact sameness of constituent atoms is neither necessary nor sufficient.

6. Oaks and horses

The next topic is *organisms*. Locke notes that throughout the his story of an oak tree (or any other organism) there is a continuous turnover of constituent matter, which implies that we can have 'the same tree' out in the garden although we do not have 'the same matter'. Locke says that this is because a tree is different from the mass of matter that makes it up at a given time, as follows:

In these two cases of a Mass of Matter, and a living Body, Identity is not applied to the same thing.

We must therefore consider wherein an Oak differs from a Mass of Matter, and that seems to me to be in this; that the one is only the Cohesion of Particles of Matter any how united, the other such a disposition of them as constitutes the parts of an Oak; and such an Organization of those parts, as is fit to receive, and distribute nourishment, so as to continue, and frame the Wood, Bark, and Leaves *etc.* of an Oak, in which consists the vegetable Life (sec. 3; 330:30).

This is offered as a snapshot of an oak, an account of what makes a material system count, at a particular moment, as an oak. Locke evidently thinks that it entails the diachronic story that he wants to establish, that is, the truth about what distinguishes an alteration in an ongoing oak from the death of one oak and the birth of a new one. He is wrong about that, however. His snapshot account, however charitably interpreted, is consistent with a diachronic story that is absurdly wrong, being in one way too strong and in another too weak, namely: the oak that is *F* at t_1 is the oak that is *G* at t_2 just in case a single aggregate of atoms constitutes at t_1 the oak that is then *F* and constitutes at t_2 the oak that is then *G*. Still, Locke's snapshot *suggests* the diachronic story that he does tell, which is excellent:

That then being one Plant, which has such an Organization of Parts in one coherent Body, partaking of one Common Life, it continues to be the same Plant, as long as it partakes of the same Life, though that Life be communicated to new Particles of Matter vitally united to the living Plant, in a like continued Organization, conformable to that sort of Plants. For this Organization being at any one instant in any one

Collection of Matter, is in that particular concrete distinguished from all other, and is that individual Life, which existing constantly from that moment both forwards and backwards in the same continuity of insensible succeeding Parts united to the living Body of the Plant, it has that Identity, which makes the same Plant, and all the parts of it, parts of the same Plant, during all the time that they exist united in that continued Organization, which is fit to convey that Common Life to all the Parts so united (sec. 4; 331:3).

This is extraordinarily good. It brings in the notion of continuity, and of turnover of constituent matter (that is, of constituent atoms), and unifies it all with help from the notion of an 'individual life'. Even though we can think of improvements on points of detail, the core of the truth is here.

Locke adds a little about animals, but the differences between oaks and horses don't matter for our purposes in this paper, or for his in the 'Identity' chapter.¹ Later on in the chapter, he mentions the possibility that some people will reject his account of animal identity on the grounds that although it is right to focus on 'Identity of Life' and not of constituent matter, what 'makes the same Life in Brutes' is 'one immaterial Spirit', one immaterial substance (sec. 12; 337:24); so that a strictly physicalistic account such as Locke's must be wrong or at least incomplete. He remarks that 'the *Cartesians* at least will not admit [this], for fear of making Brutes thinking things too.' Although Locke does not have that reason for denying that equine identity involves the identity of an immaterial substance, and although he offers no other reason, he proceeds as though he could safely

¹ Locke adds that 'machines' are like organisms in how they are reidentified across time; that is why we charged him with neglecting 'same pebble' and 'same island', but not 'same clock'. Incidentally, if shoes and ships are 'machines' in Locke's sense, his discussion covers shoes and ships and sealing wax, cabbages and kings; otherwise it doesn't.

ignore this possibility, and after this one mention no more is heard about it.

7. Organisms and material substances

In Sections 4 and 5 of the chapter, where organisms are treated, the term ‘substance’ does not occur. However, when Locke says later that ‘animal Identity is preserved in Identity of Life, *and not of Substance*’ (sec. 12; 337:17, emphasis added), he clearly means to be referring back to these sections, and is equating identity of substance with identity of constituent matter or atoms. This is implied by the whole tenor of the discussion, and especially by a clause in which the phrase ‘material Substances’ is closely allied with the phrase ‘particular Bodies’ (337:22). Locke’s thought is just that if we leave immaterial substances out of the picture, the question ‘Same person, same substance?’ can only be interpreted as asking ‘Same person, same mass of matter (that is, same aggregate of atoms)?’ to which the answer is obviously ‘No’.

A full deployment of this negative answer would take us through the twists and turns of Locke’s relatings of ‘same person’ to ‘same man’, but our purposes don’t require us to enter that labyrinth. It is enough to grasp that the first part of Locke’s answer to ‘Same person, same substance?’ relies on earlier discussions, and can coherently do so only if he is here equating ‘substance’ with ‘atom’ or ‘aggregate of atoms.’

8. People and immaterial substances

The second half of Locke’s answer to ‘Same person, same substance?’ is based on the assumption that the substances that are in question are immaterial substances, and thus are not atoms or aggregates of them. Locke no longer has his treatment of oaks and horses as a basis for answering

‘No’, but he warns the reader not to assume too hastily that the right answer is ‘Yes’. The mere hypothesis that people involve immaterial substances doesn’t imply that each person involves just one substance, Locke says, for it is consistent with a person’s relating to his constituent immaterial substances as a horse or an oak does to its atoms, constantly ingesting and excreting them.

Locke says that nothing we know rules out the possibility that each person involves a succession of substances, as each animal involves a succession of masses of matter:

As to the... Question, whether if the same thinking Substance... be changed, it can be the same Person... I answer, that cannot be resolv’d but by those, who know what kind of Substances they are, that do think; and whether the consciousness of past Actions can be transferr’d from one thinking Substance to another (sec. 13; 337:28).

He is depending here on his positive view about the diachronic identity of people, according to which: *If x and y are differently dated total temporary personal states, then they are states of a single person if and only if one of them includes states of ‘consciousness of’ items belonging to the other.*¹ Locke offers two kinds of argument for this. One is the inference of a conclusion about the diachronic identity of people from a snapshot account of a person at a moment (sec. 9; 335:21–28). This is not rigorously valid, any more than the corresponding inference for the oak is valid, and Locke probably knows that it is not—in sec. 26 at 346:28–35 he seems to connect the two more loosely.

The other is an appeal to thought experiments. We are invited to contemplate a range of actual and possible cases and to agree with Locke that our intuitive judgments on

¹ We borrow ‘total temporary state’ from H. P. Grice, ‘Personal Identity’, *Mind* 50 (1941).

them seem to be guided by the principle ‘One person, one consciousness’. The spirit of these thought experiments is well expressed in this passage from the first chapter of Book II: ‘If we take wholly away all Consciousness of our Actions and Sensations, especially Pleasure and Pain, and the concernment that accompanies it, it will be hard to know wherein to place personal Identity’ (110:19). There is an enormous amount to be said about the positive theory, none of it relevant to this paper.

Locke has his thesis **(1)** ‘Same person, same consciousness’ firmly in hand, though not soundly argued for, when he addresses the question **(2)** ‘Same person, same substance?’ which he therefore equates with **(3)** ‘Same consciousness, same substance?’ He sees the truth of **(1)** as a matter of conceptual analysis, as discoverable by attending properly to our ideas. (He does not imply that our general idea of identity needs scrutiny: the problem about personal identity, he rightly thinks, is chiefly a problem about *person*. ‘To find wherein *personal Identity* consists, we must consider what *Person* stands for’ (sec. 9; 335:11; see also sec. 15; 340:23).) But just because that analysis palpably does not bring in the concept ‘same substance’, he holds that what the right answer is to **(2)** or **(3)** is a sheer matter of fact.

What kind of matter of fact? What is at issue here, and how might the issue be resolved? That depends on what Locke’s notion of immaterial substance is. We shall describe it first in general terms and then in application to his treatment of **(3)** ‘Same consciousness, same substance?’

9. How ‘substance’ is used in the ‘Identity’ chapter

If Locke’s ‘Identity’ chapter is to have a decent degree of

unity, we need a uniform understanding of ‘substance’ all through it. For a start, then, how does Locke come to equate *material substance* with *atom*? We need to know that, if we are to have an understanding of the unqualified ‘substance’ that will carry over into ‘thinking substance’.

In fact, Locke does not explicitly say that all and only atoms are material substances. His discussion of oaks and horses implies, at most, that material substances are at least as basic as atoms; nothing in the argument rules out the possibility that each atom relates to a sequence of material substances as each oak relates to a sequence of atoms. Locke’s main point is that oaks themselves are not substances, because there are items of a *more* basic kind—items that are *nearer* to being substances—many of which flow through a single oak; and from this it follows also that many material substances flow through a single oak, whether those substances are atoms or something more fundamental out of which atoms are, so to speak, constructed. But Locke’s discussion of atoms themselves strongly suggests that he thinks of them as basic; what he says about the integrity of their boundaries may be intended to imply that they don’t have any turnover of constituent matter; so we have little hesitation in speaking of his equation of atoms with material substances.

Our thesis is not that Locke uses ‘material substance’ to mean *atom*. We hold rather that he uses it in this chapter to mean *thing-like¹ item that is quantified over at a basic level in one’s ontology of the material world*. Using the term ‘substance’ in that way, he argues that oaks are not substances, and that their relationship to atoms suffices to show this.

¹ The qualification is needed because Locke might well have been prepared to allow non-substances to figure in his basic ontology, for example, ideas. The point is that material substances are the items in the category of substance over which he is prepared to quantify in his basic ontology of the material world.

From that account of what Locke means by ‘material substance’ in the ‘Identity’ chapter, it is easy to extract a meaning for ‘substance’, namely: *thing-like item that is quantified over at a basic level of one’s ontology*. And then ‘thinking substance’ means *thing-like item that is quantified over at a basic level in one’s ontology of the mental world*, so that a thinking substance is a *basic* subject of thoughts, sensations and the rest. And ‘immaterial substance’ will mean, of course, *thing-like non-material item that is quantified over at a basic level of one’s ontology* (presumably, one’s ontology of the mental world).

The term ‘basic’ needs to be explained, especially since it is our term for a notion we find Locke employing in this chapter. Locke may not have worked out in hard detail the notion of basicness that (according to us) is at work here. His actual use of the notion in this chapter—that is, his operative constraint on the application of ‘substance’ in this chapter—requires only that a basic thing does not have parts that it loses or gains, as masses of matter and oaks do, or even parts that it could conceivably lose or gain. And since the notion of having a part that one could not conceivably lose or gain is incoherent, that means that a basic substance has no parts at all. But he probably derived this from a deeper and more abstract constraint on ‘substance’, requiring substances to be self-sufficient, independent in their existence, or the like. For if a thing has parts it is, in a sense, dependent on them; since it *could* lose the ones it now has, it is, so to say, at their mercy so far as retaining its integrity is concerned. Thus no composite being is totally self-sufficient. If this is what is behind Locke’s criteria for basicness in this chapter, it places him in a long intellectual tradition. For example, Aquinas’s view that God, being absolutely self sufficient, must be absolutely simple, and Leibniz’s view that no substance could have parts.

If you prefer not to think of ‘substance’ as bearing different meanings in Locke, all the above explications can just as well be put in terms of how Locke was thinking about substance in these passages, or of what kinds of substances he was focusing on. Thus what we have expressed as an account of what ‘substance’ means in these passages could be reformulated as a statement about what substances Locke is addressing himself to: ‘In these passages when Locke speaks of substance he is restricting himself to thing-like items that are quantified over at a basic level in his ontology.’

So far as we know, it is only in this one chapter that the term ‘substance’ carries this special emphasis on basicness, non-compositeness, or the like. Throughout the rest of the *Essay*, substances are just *things*, and include oaks and horses and people.

Because of the way he uses the term in the ‘Identity’ chapter, Locke there understands the question ‘Same person, same substance?’ to be the question ‘When you have one enduring person, do you have one enduring thing of a basic kind?’ His discussion offers a coherent answer to this question, but not to either ‘When you have one enduring person, do you have one enduring substratum?’ or ‘When you have one enduring person, do you have one enduring thing?’

That completes our resolution of the puzzle with which we began. In the widest understanding of substance—that which has properties and stands in relations, in contrast to the properties that are had and the relations that bind—Locke does take people to be substances. But where ‘substance’ is restricted to the most basic thing-like entities out of which all others are in some sense composed or constructed, neither people nor oaks are substances, but are rather composed of, or derived from, substances, in such a way that one and the same oak (person) may be composed

of, or otherwise derived from, many different substances. A person is a substance, where that term is taken in its widest usage; but it is a substance in such wise that one and the same person may 'involve' any number of fundamental substances, whether the latter be material or immaterial. Hence the identity of a person does not necessarily carry with it the identity of a single basic substance of the sort of which people are composed.

It remains to note that Locke recognizes the possibility that one basic substance might be 'involved' in several people (sec. 14; 338:28), as well as that several basic substances might be 'involved' in one person. The status of people, vis-à-vis basic substances, leaves open the metaphysical possibility of slippage in both directions. Here Locke does not appeal to an analogy with oaks. He very sensibly does not envisage the possibility that one atom might constitute several different oaks sequentially; one atom does not an oak make, even once. The closest analogue would be the point that one and the same atom could be a part of many different organisms. And, surprisingly enough, this fact about oaks has an exact analogue in Lockean possibilities for people. Given Locke's acknowledged state of ignorance about basic thinking substances, he is in no position to rule out the possibility that at a particular moment a person is made up of a number of particular (even immaterial) basic substances. Indeed, although he usually speaks as if a person will consist of exactly one immaterial substance at a time, there are passages that hint at the other possibility:

And therefore those, who place thinking in an immaterial Substance only, before they can come to deal with these Men, must shew why personal Identity cannot be preserved in the change of immaterial Substances,

or variety of particular immaterial Substances, as well as animal Identity is preserved in the change of material Substances, or variety of particular Bodies (sec. 12; 337:18, emphasis added).

The italicized phrase makes explicit the recognition that people as well as organisms might conceivably be made up of a plurality of coexisting basic substances.¹

10. 'Same consciousness, same substance?'

The question of whether a single consciousness could be carried by more than one substance is one to which Locke prudently ventures no answer: he says it can be answered only 'by those who know what kind of substances they are that do think'. This is right. With no theory about what items will be quantified over at the basic level in the best theory of mind, we can't say how many such items could be involved, sequentially or synchronously, in a single person.

This is cautiously agnostic in a way that Locke isn't about the identity of oaks. We know, at least down to a certain level, what actually goes on when an oak endures. We know that when an oak endures there *is* something more basic, which does *not* stay with the oak. But in the case of an enduring person, Locke holds, we don't know what the underlying reality is: we have no well-grounded theory about enduring people, analogous to our theory that explains the persistence of oaks in terms of the organization of fleeting particles. So Locke is unwilling either to affirm or deny that the persistence of a person involves the persistence of a single enduring substance.

One might expect him to be neutral on the question, but in fact he leans to one side. He says of the unity of consciousness that he thinks determines personal identity:

¹ The passage is syntactically ambiguous. We think it means something along the lines of: '...cannot be preserved in the change of immaterial substances or in the change of groups of immaterial substances.'

'I agree the more probable Opinion is, that this consciousness is annexed to, and the Affection of one individual immaterial Substance' (sec. 25; 345:25). If this means, as it seems to, that the weight of evidence is on that side, then Locke is not entitled to any such opinion. But perhaps that is not what he means: his point might be merely that this is the simplest and most natural hypothesis; or he might have in mind a certain theological reason for thinking that people correspond, one for one, to thinking substances.

That theological reason surfaced a few sections earlier, where Locke says that in our present ignorance about thinking substances the question of whether two or more of them could underlie a single consciousness 'will by us . . . be best resolv'd into the Goodness of God, who as far as the Happiness or Misery of any of his sensible Creatures is concerned in it, will not by a fatal Error of theirs transfer from one to another, that consciousness, which draws Reward or Punishment with it' (sec. 13; 338:13). The explanation of this strange remark depends on the fact that the 'sensible creatures' in question are not people but thinking substances, and on the fact—as we take it to be—that Locke is here assuming the truth of the following three theses.

(1) When God punishes a person He thereby hurts the thinking substance which the person at that time 'involves'. That is reasonable, given the rest of the picture. How could you hurt a person except by hurting the thinking substance that he or she involves?

(2) Whether punishment falls on a given person on Judgment Day depends on what sins that person has committed, not upon what sins have been committed by or associated with the thinking substance that he or she involves. For a firm statement of this doctrine, see Locke's sec. 26, starting at 346:38; we shall discuss it in our final section.

(3) What sins a person has committed depends upon what

sins fall within the scope of his or her consciousness, that is, what sins are now thought of by the now-involved thinking substance as ones that it was associated with. That follows immediately from Locke's theory of personal identity.

Put those three together, and out rolls the conclusion: If on Judgment Day person P involves thinking substance S, and S seems to recollect a sin as one it was associated with, then by thesis **(3)** it follows that that P is the person who committed the sin, even if S had nothing to do with it; and so by thesis **(2)** punishment will fall on P; and so by thesis **(1)** punishment, or at least hurt, will fall on S. A 'fatal error' indeed! There is here a sober basis upon which Locke can think that God in His goodness is not likely to let it happen that different thinking substances take turns in being involved in (constituting, etc.) a single person: It would not be fair to some of the substances.

11. 'Person' is 'a forensic term'

Nothing in this chapter of Locke's is more puzzling and teasing than his statement that 'person' is 'a forensic term'. There would be no puzzle if this were a mere addition to the rest of the account, blandly informing us that personal identity is of interest to the law. But it is clear in context that the forensic nature of 'person' is supposed to help us to understand, or perhaps to be convinced by, Locke's account of personal identity; and it is not obvious how that can be so. To explain it, we need first to sketch in some background.

Locke, as is well known, does not regard any of the sorts of things marked out by everyday general terms as a 'natural kind' in a deep sense. He sees all our classificatory activities as reflections of how we choose to select from the super-abundant array of possible classifications for which nature provides (III.iii.13, 415:14); the selections we make depend on the ideas we have, and that, Locke seems to think, reflects

our past experience and our interests and activities. He sees no basis on which we could have a taxonomy that is uniquely *the* one that is privileged by nature itself, being deeply and objectively marked out by the world independently of us.¹ He is especially vigorous in defending this pragmatic approach to classification in connection with things that straddle the lines we draw—non-rational offspring of human parents, and so on—about which he insists that it is for us to *decide* how to classify them according to what suits our needs best.

He does not explicitly apply these views of his to the diachronic identity of atoms, masses, oaks, men, people, and so on; but they are relevant, all the same. Let us make the point in terms of what Locke says about durable and re-identifiable oaks—not his treatment of the fact that people draw lines through the genus of trees in one way rather than another, but his treatment of the fact that people treat some masses of matter and not others as temporarily constituting a single enduring plant. Locke's doctrine about that entails the following important thesis:

What makes it the case that a single plant is composed of mass m_1 of matter at t_1 and of mass m_2 of matter at t_2 is the conjunction of

(i) the facts about a certain region of space-time, of which one part is defined by m_1 at t_1 and another by m_2 at t_2 ,

and

(ii) our idea of an enduring plant.

It is because our idea of an oak includes *that* idea of an

enduring plant, rather than some other, that we collect certain masses-at-times and not others as making up a single oak;² just as certain other aspects of our idea of an oak lead us to collect this and that tree together as oaks while setting those others aside as elms. In short, our idea of an oak doesn't just guide us in marking off oaks from elms etc.; it also guides us in marking off the masses-at-times that do from those that do not temporarily constitute a single oak. Now, Locke's pragmatism about how we do and should pull some trees and not others into the class of oaks (as distinct from that of elms, say) applies just as much to how we do and should pull some masses-at-times and not others together into a single plant (rather than more than one). If Locke were faced with a course of events that straddled the line—that is, two masses-at-times that in some ways did and in other ways didn't qualify as being 'united in that continued organization which is fit to convey that common life to all the parts so united' (331:16)—he ought to say that it is for us to *decide* whether or not to tighten up our idea of 'same plant' so as to make these two items belong to the same plant, the decision being based on our intellectual and practical needs.

We are not conscious of any element of real choice in our thoughts about what counts as a single enduring plant, because our everyday experience of plants doesn't offer us any obviously practicable alternative. But Locke could acknowledge this while still contending that his pragmatism is a fundamental and essential part of the story.

¹ Locke distinguishes two versions of the view that there is such a privileged subset (III.iii.17; 417:34): a noxious one and another that is 'more rational' but still irrelevant to our actual classifications because it requires us to know more than we do—and perhaps more than we ever shall—in the general and the applied sciences.

² That is a *façon de parler*: we do not populate Locke's ontology with any such items as 'masses-at-times'. Everything we say about which masses-at-times constitute an oak can be correctly though long-windedly expressed as a statement about which masses are temporarily parts of the oak, with the understanding that each mass is identified in terms of where it is and how it is organized at a particular time.

So far in this section we have presented what we think ought to have been Locke's view about the idea of an enduring atom, or mass of matter, or plant, or animal. It is only when we move on from these to *people* that the pragmatism is actually announced:

Where-ever a Man finds, what he calls himself, there I think another may say is the same *Person*. It is a Forensick Term appropriating Actions and their Merit; and so belongs only to intelligent Agents capable of a Law, and Happiness and Misery (sec. 26; 346:24).

When Locke says that 'person' is 'a forensic term', he means that we have the idea of *person* that we do because it answers best to our moral and legal interests. In pursuing those

interests, we often want to know

(1) Of the personal items¹ in the world now, which is conscious of having done A?

And since that form of question matters so much, we reserve the word 'person' (or its plural) to help us express it:

(2) Of the people now in the world, who did A?

This does the same work as the other, because our concept of *person* gathers together sets of items that are interrelated by a 'same consciousness' relation. And slightly more complex sentences than **(2)** can replace ones that are vastly more complex than **(1)**. Thus, according to Locke, our idea of enduring person earns its keep.

¹ 'Personal items' may be replaced by 'person-stages' or 'persons-at-times' or '[embodied] thinking-substances-at-times'. No choice is comfortable, but we have to say *something*. In the preceding footnote we had no difficulty with the analogous problem in the theory of plants. We spoke of the plant as temporarily having as parts certain *masses*, identified in terms of where and how they are at times; and such masses can be spoken of without help from the concept of a plant. But now try to speak in Lockean fashion of people as temporarily having as parts Fs identified in terms of where and how they are at particular times. What can F be? We have nothing comparable to 'mass of matter' or 'aggregate of atoms'—that is, nothing that fits into the story in the right way but does not involve the concept of a person. That does not mean that Locke's story is wrong; it does mean that it needs more ontological work than he puts into it.