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LOCKE'S CONCEPT OF PERSON

"The besetting sin of philosophers," observes Hilary putnam in his Dewey Lectures (March, 1994, Columbia University) "seems to be throwing the baby out with the bathwater." "From the beginning," he continues, "each 'new wave' of philosophers has simply ignored the insights of the previous wave in the course of advancing its own. Today, we stand near the end of a century in which there have been many new insights in philosophy, but at the same time there has been an unprecedented forgetting of the insights of previous centuries and millennia." What better example could one find of such a situation than Locke's, whose views expressed in the four books which constitute his monumental *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* were, and still are, severely criticized and in some cases abandoned by, not only his immediate successors but, even contemporary philosophers today without acknowledging his basic insights. For instance, Ryle, while commenting that the historians of philosophy have "written off" Locke not merely as an empiricist but as the founder of the School of English empiricism, observes, "It is not quite clear what an empiricist is, but it is quite clear that most of the doctrines which an empiricist should hold are strenuously denied by Locke. That the evidence of particular perceptions can never be a foundation for true knowledge, that true knowledge is both completely general and completely certain and is of the type of pure mathematics, that inductive generalizations from collected observations can never yield better than probable generalizations giving us opinion but not knowledge, are doctrines which Locke's whole *Essay* is intended to establish. He even goes so far with the rationalist metaphysician as to hold that the existence of God is demonstrable, and he is at one with the Cambridge Platonists in arguing that the principles of morality are demonstrable by the same methods and with the same certainty as any of the propositions of geometry (*John Locke on the Human Understanding*' "Locke and Berkeley" Eds. Martin and Armstrong, pp. 25-26).

Coming nearer home to the issue at hand, viz, the concept of person and its identity (personal identity), Antony Flew claims to

have shown in his paper, "Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity" that Locke's "Central answer was Wrong," and that the sources of his mistakes, he claims, are five. He concludes by observing thus: "We neither began nor intended to begin to tackle the problem itself, it was a sufficient and very Lockean task to clear the ground of a few obstructions and to point out some of the dangers which beset the road" (Ibid. p. 178).

It is beyond the scope of this paper to enter into considering what the 'baby' is and what the 'bath-water' in Locke's *Essay*. Its purpose is modest and its scope limited to consider only the concept of person as explicated by Locke, in the light of modern philosophical thought, especially of David Wiggins and Hilary Putnam.

Locke defined a person as "a thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places". (*Essay*, II, XXVII, 2) It is generally accepted, on the basis of this definition, that according to Locke *continuity of consciousness* seems to be an integral part of what he means by a person. And to secure the continuing identity of a person, one experience must flow into the next experience in some stream of consciousness. Such a continuity of consciousness is then explained in terms of memory. In other words, a person, according to Locke's conception, is an 'object' (something) *essentially aware* of its progress and persistence through time, and peculiar among all other kinds of thing by virtue of the fact that its present being is always under the cognitive and affective influence of its experiential memory of what it was in the past. In short, according to Locke, memory and reflection in terms of mental connectedness is part of the *concept* of person, for they help to *constitute* the continuity of person. Continuity of consciousness is the condition of *identity* of person, i. e., knowledge of being the *same person* and it is always instructive to avoid the serious confusion between *how* we know something and *what* it is for that thing to be so, or in other words, between an account of *what a thing* is and the elucidation of the *identity conditions* for members of its kinds or, to follow David Wiggins, between *sameness* and *substance*. It is not this distinction, however important it is between *what a person is* and what its *identity conditions* are and their intimate but complex relation that will occupy us in the rest of the

paper, but only the former, i. e., what a person is and it needs to be acknowledged at this stage that I owe the subsequent discussion primarily, if not entirely, to David Wiggins' very interesting book *Sameness and Substance* (Oxford, 1980) where he considers arguments for and against Locke's position on these questions - i. e., questions about the *nature* and *identity* of person - in the background of modern philosophical thought suggesting in the end his own position regarding these questions.

What then *is* a person? Is it a body, an animal, a man (human being) or a disembodied being transcending bodies?

It is almost universally believed that a person cannot be *equated* with the body on the ground that the lifeless corpse is not the person, and on the fact that there is something absurd in the proposition that people's bodies play chess, talk sense, know arithmetic, or even run or jump or sit down. As Wiggins observes "A person is material in the sense of being essentially constituted by matter, but in some strict and different sense of 'material', viz., being definable or properly describable in terms of the concepts of the sciences of matter (physics, chemistry, and biology even) *person* is not a material concept". (p. 164) And in this sense persons can be said to transcend bodies. However, although person cannot be *equated* with a body, which is a material entity, it may be held that a person is a persisting material entity "*essentially*" endowed with the biological potentiality for the exercise of *all* the faculties and capacities "*conceptually constitutive*" of personhood - sentiment, desire, belief, motion, memory, and the various other elements which are involved in the particular mode of *activity* that marks the *extension of the concept of person*. This can be called the *naturalist view* of the concept of person as different from the *materialist physicalist view* of the concept of person considered earlier.

What about equating *person* with *man*? Locke does make a distinction between a person and man. Locke's claim is that *x* is a person only if *x* has and exercises some sufficient capacity to *remember* or record sufficiently well from onetime to the next enough of his immediately previous states or actions. Thus memory-actual and potential is the necessary and sufficient condition for being a person, according to Locke. But there are situations like amnesia,

sleep, etc, which would disallow us to call x a person, but not disallow us to call x a man, since man is "vitally united" to the organized body which persists. So man and person needs to be kept apart according to Locke. Against this view of Locke's Wiggins observes that however well one makes the distinctions between the concepts man and person, this can hardly show that nothing falls under both concepts and asks under which is John Locke? Instead, he tries to show that the concepts *man and person* are "sortally concordant" and determine for anything falling in the extension of both a *unitary principle of persistence*" (p/61, f. n. 16). Wiggins thus finds both the naturalist and the materialist/physicalist/'scientific' view of persons unsatisfactory. His own suggestion is *what he calls animal attribute view*.

According to the animal attribute view, *person* is a concept whose *defining marks* are to be given in terms of a *natural kind* determinable, say *animal*, plus what may be called a *functional or*, what Wiggins prefers to say, *systemic component* (i. e., finite list of non-extension involving attributes). So x is a person if and only if x is an animal falling under the extension of a kind whose typical members perceive, feel, remember, imagine, desire, make projects move themselves at will, speak, carry out projects, acquire a character as they age, are happy or miserable, are susceptible to concern for members of their own or like species, conceive of themselves as perceiving, feeling, remembering, imagining, desiring, making projects, speaking have, and conceive of themselves as having, a part accessible in experience-memory and a future accessible in intention, etc. "On this account", observes Wiggins, "*person* is a non-biological qualification of *animal*" and further adds, "according to this view, a person is any animal that is such by its kind as to have the biological capacity to enjoy fully the psychological attributes enumerated; and whether or not a given animal kind qualifies is left to be a strictly empirical matter". (pp.71-72) If we accept such a view of person then the *extension* of the concept *person* would include not only human beings but also such creatures as chimpanzees or dolphins. There would be no one real essence of person as such; but every person could still have the real essence of a certain kind of animal. This would be the real essence *in virtue of which* he was a person. The real essences of the various kinds of persons would be for empirical investigation on the levels of

biology and neurophysiology and psychology even of history, economics, literary art (not excluding descriptive philosophy) and psychoanalysis. (p.72).

It should be stressed at this stage that underlying such an animal attribute view of person is Wiggian's contention that the concept of person, though not *corresponding* to a single natural kind, might still be *akin* to a natural kind concept. What then is a natural kind and natural kind concept or term? It is generally held that Hilary Putnam popularized the notion of natural kind and natural kind concept. Whether or not a particular object is a *natural kind* will be determined according to Putnam by some *lawlike principles* that will collect together the actual *extension of the kind* around an *arbitrary good specimen* of it. i.e., of its extension. Let us very briefly try to understand Putnam's view.

In his well-known paper "Is Semantics Possible?" Putnam considers *one* kind of general names which are associated with natural kinds, that is, "with classes of things that we regard as of explanatory importance, classes whose normal distinguishing characteristics are 'held together' or even explained by deep-lying mechanisms" (*Mind, language and Reality*, vol. 2, p. 139). His contention is that the *traditional* theories of meaning "radically falsify" the properties of such words. Quoting Austin he observes that what we have been given by philosophers, logicians, and 'semantic theories' alike, is a "myth-eaten description" (p. 139).

According to the traditional view, the meaning of, say 'lemon' is given by specifying a conjunction of *properties*. For each of these properties, the statement 'Lemons have the property p' is an analytic truth, and if P1, P2,....., Pn are all the properties in the conjunction, then "anything with all of the properties P1,....., Pn is a lemon" is likewise an analytic truth. In other words according to what putnam calls the *traditional* view, the term 'Lemon' is definable by simply conjoining these 'defining characteristics' and this view, Putnam contends, is false because the "most obvious" difficulty is that a natural kind may have "*abnormal members*." For example, taking 'yellow peel' as one of the defining characteristics of 'lemon' a green lemon is still a lemon-even if, owing to some abnormality, it *never* turns yellow.

To meet this difficulty, the following definition may be suggested: *X is a lemon* =df. *X belongs to a natural kind whose normal members have yellow peel, etc.* Putnam focuses his analysis on two notions involved in this definition, the notions of *natural kind* and *normal member*, with an observation that "Meta-Science is today in its infancy: and terms like 'natural kind' and 'normal member', are in the same boat as the more familiar meta-scientific terms 'theory' and 'explanation', as far as *resisting a speedy and definitive analysis is concerned*" (p.41.). However, Putnam adds that the proposed definition of 'lemon' uses terms which themselves resist definition is "not a fatal objection." What is wrong with the definition according to Putnam is that if it is correct then the traditional idea of the "*force of general terms*" is badly mistaken (p.41). To say that something is a lemon is, on the above definition, to say that it belongs to a natural kind whose normal members have certain properties: but *not* to say that it *necessarily* has those properties itself. There are no *analytic* truths of the form *every lemon has p*. What has happened, contends Putnam, is this: the traditional theory has taken an account which is correct for the 'one-criterion' concepts (i.e., for such concepts as 'bachelor'), and made it a general account of the meaning of general names. As he puts it: "A theory which correctly describes the behaviour of perhaps three hundred words has been asserted to correctly describe the behaviour of tens of thousands of general names" (p.41). Putnam concludes after a thorough analysis of the above definition that the above definition is *correct* to the extent that what it says *isn't* analytic indeed isn't (e.g., *Lemon has yellow peel*) but it is *incorrect* in that what would be analytic if it were correct isn't (e.g. *Every Lemon has P.*) (p.42) and recommends the following analysis of natural kind words as 'lemon' and 'tiger'.

There is somehow associated with the word 'tiger' a *theory*: not the actual theory we believe about tigers, which is very complex, but an oversimplified theory which describes a tiger *stereotype*. It describes a *normal member* of the natural kind. It is not necessary that we believe this theory, though in the case of 'tiger' we do. But it is necessary that we be aware that *this* theory is associated with the word: if our stereotype of a tiger ever changes, then the word 'tiger' would have changed its meaning. If lemons, for example, all turn blue, the word 'lemon' will not *immediately*

change its meaning-but in time. To sum up, according to Putnam there are a few *core facts* about the term 'lemon' or 'tiger' such that one can convey the use of 'lemon' or 'tiger' by simply conveying those facts: more precisely, one cannot convey the approximate use *unless* one gets the core facts across (p. 148). Thus in the case of a natural kind word, the core facts are that a *normal member* of the kind has certain characteristics, or that this idea is at least the *stereotype* associated with word. However, it is *not enough*, according to Putnam, that by the use of a natural kind word one conveys the associated *stereotype* (i.e., the associated idea of the characteristics of the normal member of the kind): one must also convey the *extension*, one must indicate *which* kind the stereotype is supposed to 'fit' (p. 150) without entering into the problem as to whether giving extension is part of giving the meaning of a term let us turn from this necessary and useful digression to our main issue and note the moral of the above discussion for the concept of person.

We recall that Wiggins contended that the concept of person, though not corresponding, can be akin to a natural kind concept. And relying on Putnam's view about natural kind and natural kind concept like 'lemon' we can say about person that there are a few *corefacts* about 'person' such that one can convey the use of 'person' by simply conveying those facts. More precisely, one cannot convey the approximate use of 'person' *unless* one gets the core facts across. Thus, as in the case of natural kind word, the core facts about 'person' are that a *normal member* of the kind has certain characteristics or that a *stereotype* is associated with the word 'person'. Now whereas according to Wiggins the core facts about 'person' include 'animal' and 'psychological attributes' enumerated above, according to Locke as witnessed in his definition above they are continuity of consciousness or memory'. Nevertheless we can rewrite Locke's famous definition given above as suggested by Wiggins by saying that a person is any *animal* the physical make-up of whose species constitutes the species' *typical members*, thinking intelligent beings with reason and reflection, and *typically* enables them to consider themselves as themselves, the same thinking things, in different times and places (p. 181).

One interesting question can be asked, before we conclude: Are the 'core facts' of person identical with the 'real essence' of

person? One is tempted to answer this question in the affirmative. But will not such an affirmative answer lead us-and Locke, if he would agree - to rationalistic metaphysics which Ryle refers and not to empiricism for which Locke is known in history? A way out might be to say that just as certain marks of birth, shape and appearance have to *stand proxy* for the real essence of man or the concept *man*, so being a man or being a human being is the only thing that we can make stand proxy for what it is to be a person. A human being is our only *stereotype* for *person*.

It must be noted and stressed finally that the concept of person in Locke, howsoever vague and open textured and opaque it may be, does not remain merely a formal or theoretical concept. It finds its applications in substantial political, social, moral and legal issues the consideration of which, however, is beyond the scope of this paper.