Final Paper

In John Locke’s paper *Of Identity and Diversity*, Locke examines the topic of personal identity. Locke’s goal in this paper is to determine what a person actually is, and how a person persists through time through the idea of personal identity. The notion of personal identity has been a long debated topic that started centuries before Locke wrote his paper on identity. To do this, Locke uses psychological methods to determine what personal identity was and how to distinguish this form a man, as well as examining the issues of how personal identity had an impact on the persistence of time of a person.

At the beginning of Locke’s paper on personal identity, he makes a clear distinction between a man and a person. To make this distinction, he relies on the physical body itself, with no impact from mind or the thoughts that stem from the mind. He made it clear that the physical body and the mind were very distinct from each other. Locke came to the conclusion that the physical body defined what a man was. After Locke was able to define what a man was, he then answered what the difference was between a man and a person. The main difference, as Locke states, is the notion of identity. The person is able to identify itself through memories and knowledge of their experiences. Even though the human body is constantly changing through natural processes, the person is remains the same throughout these processes. The person is the same because they know themself as the same being as they were in the past while in different places as they were in the past. Locke puts a lot of emphasis on the importance of consciousness and the impact that thought has on determining if the man is also a person. Consciousness is the most important factor because it is through consciousness that people can use their memories and
knowledge to identify as themselves. As long as the person can identify itself as the same thing as it was in the past, the person is the same. Without memory the human would not be able to identify with itself because it would not be able to recognize that they are the same human just in the future because they would have no reference to the past.

Not only does the being have to be able to identify itself with itself to be a person, but it also has to have the body of a human also. This was exemplified through the story of the Brazilian parrot talking to a prince (Locke 334). Even though the parrot could communicate and rationalize like a human, Locke made it clear that this parrot would not be considered to be a human because it did not share any similarities other than the fact that both the human and the parrot could rationalize. The main difference in this scenario is that the bodies of the two do not share a lot of similarities. Even though the body is an important part of personal identity it is very minimal in comparison to the consciousness. Locke explains how one can identify the body but if someone loses parts of their body they can still be the same person. He uses the example of somebody getting their hand cut off (Locke 337). Before the hand became removed from the body, the person would consider the hand to be apart of themself as a whole. But, as soon as the hand was cut off they had no physical or mental attachment to it, thus resulting in the hand having no impact on their self-identity. Another reason why not connecting personal identity to the body is because the body is undergoing changes constantly. Using the consciousness in order to explain personal identity is a much better way than using physical body parts. If one would use the body parts to describe this, then a person would not exist since a being is never the same physically.

Locke made it clear that as long as the consciousness is the same the body has no difference as long as it is a human body. On page 336 Locke says, “For it being the same
consciousness that makes a Man be himself to himself, personal identity depends on that only, whether it be annexed only to one individual Substance, or can be continued in a succession of several Substances,” (Locke 336). This quote makes it clear that a person can persist through time solely by being able to identify with themself. This is important because it solves possible objections that people would have with Locke’s argument. Even if science was able to allow a human to be able to put their brain inside of another body, as long as the person was able to identify as themself, regardless of body, they would be the same.

While the argument of the person persisting through time only through consciousness and the ability of a person to know itself as itself is a strong arguments, there are arguments against this thinking that expose weaknesses. One in particular is dealing with memory loss. A specific example of this is through the movie 50 First Dates. In this movie, a main character suffers from short-term memory loss where she has memory of the events that happened in the present day, but once a new day starts all of those memories are lost. The character was unaware that the day was years into the future as a result of not having any recollection of any of the events that happened after the accident other than the events that happened on the present day.

While there are no current cases of this condition, scientists say it is possible, but more importantly it illustrates a flaw within Locke’s argument. Let us say that person A is the being today and person B is yesterday. Both person A and B can identify with the person before the accident, this makes A and B the same person as before the accident. But, A cannot identify with B because A cannot identify as B since there is no memory to bridge the gap between days. This exposes part of Locke’s idea that a person can identify continuity over time, but since A and B cannot establish this continuity this would mean that they are not the same person even though Locke’s definition of a person holds true. Another problem that 50 First Dates exposes in
Locke’s definition of personal identity is the personal criterion. The definition of this, as previously stated, is a person B is the same person as a person C just in a case B has some memory of being C. Using the person A and person B example it can be proven that the two different people have different personal criterion. But, the definition of a person and personal criterion go hand in hand, thus making Locke’s idea of the personal criterion false.

The main argument that I have, and was briefly mentioned in class, is about what happened to Phineas Gage. Gage was a worker on a railroad when a pole went through his brain, although he survived this incident his personality was drastically changed. Locke’s view on personal identity would consider Gage to be the same person in both the definition of a person, and in personal criterion. Since Gage had full recollection of himself prior to the railroad accident and could identify himself as himself in different places he passes the test of being the same person. Also, he passes the personal criterion test because he has memories of being the same person because the pole did not impact the memory center in his brain. But after the accident Gage did not have the same personality. According to Locke’s definition of a person and personal criterion Gage would be the same person. But, I do not believe that this person would truly be able to identify with themself because of the drastic changes in actions and thoughts on everyday experiences. I do not believe this because although Gage could identify the same body, there was no real mental connection in regards to the thoughts on previous actions. I think that personal identity has more to do with common beliefs more so than just an ability to have your conscious know that it is the same conscious as it was during a previous time.

Another part of Locke’s argument that I believe is false is the part about never having a constant body. It has been proven that the body is always undergoing changes in the cells, but under Locke’s assumptions the body would never be the same body. But, I believe that the body
does not have a set limit of changes that it has to undergo in order to be a different body. I think that there is an arbitrary point that would judge the change in the body to result in a completely new body. Also, in a way the body is a way to identify oneself. So if the body has undergone small changes, the mind and conscious would still be able to identify its body as its body. This whole situation is very similar to the problem with the ancient Greek ship. The boat’s structure would rot away naturally and be replaced by new boards. The problem surrounding this boat has to do with the identity of the ship. Because the boat has undergone a single change, under Locke’s view this is a different boat. But, the identity of the ship is the same in regards to its name and people’s perception of it. The same is similar to the person; the identity of the person is consistent even after the minor changes that happen in the cells.

The final problem I have with Locke’s argument on personal identity is the necessity of the person to be a human. In regards to the advances of technology recently there have been vast improvements of computers in regards to making rational decisions. In connection with the computers there are robots being made that use these rational decisions to act like a person would. In the near future there is a high possibility of a robot that looks like a human, talks like a human and thinks like a human. But, under Locke’s definition of a person this machine would not be considered a person even though it could do everything that a person could do. I do not believe that this would be an easy fix for Locke to make. Since Locke brought up the example of the talking parrot’s conversation with the prince, he made it clear that just because something is rational does not make it a person. This situation is different because a rational animal has much different physical characteristics as compared to a human, but these robots that they are making look almost identical to a human. To make the change, Locke would need to clear up his definition of a man in order to make this case more clear.
In conclusion, John Locke’s paper *On Personal Identity* is a strong paper, but there are some flaws with the writing. Most of the topics covered in the paper I believe to be true. But certain topics, such as memory, personality change, physical change and the definition of a man I believe are not true. I believe the personality change, in particular with Phineas Gage, to be the most controversial of the arguments since it passes Locke’s entire criterion of personal identity but still results in unanswered outcomes. But, I do not believe that this problem to be enough to makes Locke’s entire argument false.