

Locke UNLOCKED

A Look at John Locke's *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*

PERSONAL
IDENTITY



Modelling the Idea A Prince / A Cobbler

The Philosophical Idea

“...should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince’s past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince’s actions”

Bk II, Ch XXVII, 15

Photo: Cliff Landesman



Are you your body? Are you your brain? Are you your soul? Locke thought you were none of these. He reflected about the nature of a person using a variety of “thought experiments” or brief stories. In one of his most suggestive stories, Locke imagined that a cobbler dies and after his death, the consciousness of a prince enters the cobbler’s body. This

person remembers all of the prince’s past experiences and none of the cobbler’s. We would say that the prince now occupies the body of the cobbler. So you are not your body or even your brain. Locke concluded that what makes you the same over time is your continuity of consciousness and your memories.

Explore the idea



Listen to the podcast

<https://visit.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/event/locke-unlocked#collapse3386686>



Read the article ‘What makes us who we are?’

https://explore.org/question-detail/do_we_stay_the_same_from_birth#2605



Watch the film on John Locke and personal identity
<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02h73cx>

Watch neuropsychologist Paul Broks talking about John Locke and Personal Identity <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b05qgcgx>.



Discuss these questions:

- 1 Write a 100-word pitch explaining what you think is most important in shaping our identities. Discuss in your ideas in small groups.
- 2 What do you think of the prince and the cobbler thought experiment?
- 3 John Locke thought that what we remember helps us to be sure we are the same person from one day to the next. What does this mean if someone has traumatic brain injury or disease, such as severe cases of amnesia or dementia – are they the same person? How else could we think about continuity as a person?
- 4 Think about how you would you define personal identity. Now think about how you would define cultural identity. How do the two relate to each other?
- 5 Could cultural identity be so important that changes in cultural identity could result in a change of personal identity – an entirely different person?



Try making the crown or boots using origami. You can watch a video by origami and wellbeing artist Dr Lizzie Burns to help you <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UfifpxNlnwc>

Take it further

- 6 Think further about the different ways we talk about identity today. Some modern uses of ‘identity’ are different from Locke’s use of ‘identity’. How do people express their identities on social media? What risks and limitations should we be mindful of for ourselves, and when looking at how others express themselves?



Explore the other resources about the question ‘Do we stay the same from birth?’

https://explore.org/question-detail/do_we_stay_the_same_from_birth



Read the article ‘You got soul! Are your soul and identity linked?’

https://explore.org/question-detail/do_we_stay_the_same_from_birth#2608.

- 7 Can you create a personal definition for the idea of the ‘soul’ and share with a partner? Feedback your joint ideas to the class.

