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Cowardly Soldier versus Brave Officer

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In the question of what constitutes personal identity, John Locke’s theory of memory links has endured as a major theory to the present day. That’s not to say that it hasn’t been substantially revised, but in modern philosophers like Quinton we find what is essentially a reinforced Lockean point of view. However, just as Locke’s theory has endured so has its criticisms. In particular, Butler and Reid raise several objections to Locke, some of which remain live issues. Here I shall consider one of these objections, namely the objection that a theory of memory links itself presupposes personal identity.\(^1\) The particular form in which I consider this objection will be that of separating false memories from real memories. I will provide an account of how a Lockean theory can distinguish between these two types of memory without resorting to personal identity, thus escaping the charge of circularity.

First, we consider the Lockean view to be defended. Locke himself proposed that personal identity consisted in memory links. However, this view is quickly seen to be insufficient, as the well-known brave officer paradox shows. Briefly, we imagine a callow youth who grows up to be a brave officer and later in life becomes a senile general. Suppose that the officer remembers being the youth and the general remembers being the officer, but the general has forgotten his childhood. So then the general is the same person as the officer and the officer is the same person as the youth, but the general is not the same person as the youth. This clearly contradicts the transitivity of identity, and we see that better version of this view is needed (Reid 114-115). A modified form, proposed by Quinton, holds that personal identity consists in continuity of memory and character. In particular, suppose we have at time \( t \) a person \( A \) who possesses some character and undergoes certain experiences. If a short time later we have a person \( B \), then we say that \( B \) is the same person as \( A \) if \( B \) has a similar character to \( A \) and possesses memories of some of the experiences which \( A \) underwent at time \( t \). Now that we have a notion of what it means for two people with a small temporal separation to be the same person, we can obtain a notion of what it means for any two people to be the same by insisting that

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\(^{1}\) Butler and Reid both go on to argue that this implies that personal identity consists in strict identity of immaterial substance. Indeed, they also criticize Locke’s view for not employing strict identity, although unconvincingly. However, neither Butler and Reid’s positive view about personal identity nor their other, less compelling criticisms are relevant in this paper.
personal identity be transitive. (Actually, like any equivalence relation, we insist that personal identity be reflexive, transitive, and symmetric, but this is clearly implied in even our everyday usage of the term.)

More concretely, having found that person-stages A and B are part of the same person, we now consider a person-stage C who at some time slightly later than that of person-stage B has a similar character to B and remembers some of B’s experiences. Then by our previous criterion we say that B and C are the same person, and by transitivity, that A and C are the same person. Continuing this process, we obtain a sequence A through Z or beyond of person-stages, each of which is continuous with the person-stage immediately preceding and following it in the sequence, and thus we see that every person-stage in the sequence is part of the same person as every other person-stage in the sequence. As such, the sequence is really just a sequences of stages in the life of a single person. In Quinton’s terminology, A through Z are called “soul-phases.” We will here adopt this terminology and use “soul-phase” where we had previously used “person-stage.” So we can formulate this improved version of Locke’s theory by stating that two soul-phases at different times are part of the same person if and only if they can be linked by a continuous sequence of soul-phases, where “continuous” is understood as meaning that each soul-phase is as similar as desired to its immediate predecessor and successor by the memory/character criterion (by taking as many closely-spaced phases as needed) (Quinton 58-60).

Now we look at an objection offered by Butler and Reid. Both think that Locke’s view is circular because in order to make sense of memory links, one has to presuppose personal identity. (Butler 102; Reid 114). We shall first consider how the argument is presented against Locke and then introduce the appropriate modifications to see how it relates to Quinton’s improved Lockean view. We might call the objection the “cowardly soldier paradox” and it runs as follows. First we recall the brave officer from the brave officer paradox who is flogged as a child, captures an enemy standard as an officer, and becomes a general late in life. However, suppose there is another individual, a cowardly soldier, who was present at that battle and who
saw the brave officer capture the enemy's standard. Because he was a coward, this soldier simply stood back while the officer performed his brave deed. However, the cowardly soldier wished that it would have been he who captured the standard and became a hero. In fact, his desire was so strong that through the years he managed to deceive himself into thinking that it was he himself who captured the standard. At the time when the brave soldier has become a general, this cowardly soldier, who is now an old veteran, remembers himself as the one who captured the standard. According to Locke's theory, the old veteran must be the same person who captured the standard because he has a memory of it. However, this is impossible since the old veteran is not the same person; at that point in time he was the cowardly soldier, not the brave officer. Our common sense immediately finds the problem: the old veteran's memory of capturing the standard is a false one and thus doesn't count for the purpose of Locke's criterion. So in order to apply Locke's memory link theory, we need a way of distinguishing false memories from real ones. The difference, though, seems to simply be that a memory is real if and only if the person remembering the event is the same person as the one who performed it. Then here is where the charge of circularity arises; in order to distinguish real memories from fake ones we require the idea of personal identity. So this is one way to raise Butler and Reid's objection that Locke's theory already presupposes personal identity.

Fortunately, Quinton's revised Lockean view seems able to handle this problem. Actually, there are two closely related things we wish to be able to do. First, we want to be able to say why it is that the old veteran is not the brave officer regardless of his memory of capturing the standard, and secondly, we wish to show how the old veteran's memory can be shown to be false. Changing from Locke's view to Quinton's immediately helps with the first problem. According to Quinton, the old veteran would be the same person as the brave officer only if there were a continuous sequence of soul-phases joining the two, and this is not the case. Simply because one of the old veteran's memories corresponds to an action of the brave officer is not enough of a similarity for continuity. Presumably the character and all of the memories except those relating to a single battle would be different between the two men. Rather than asserting
that the soul-phase of the old veteran is continuous with any of those of the brave officer/old
general, it would be more accurate to say that there was simply a single memory in common
between what are otherwise wholly discontinuous soul-phase sequences. So Quinton’s view is
able to explain how the old veteran and the brave officer can be different despite the “shared”
memory.

Still, this explanation is not yet entirely complete. Because the continuity of soul-phases
criterion examines the entirety of a person’s memory and character in order to determine personal
identity it is able to distinguish between the two men. However, this leaves us with the question
of how the same memory could be had by two men we know to be different. So we must now
pick up the problem of how to determine that the old veteran has a false memory while the old
general has a real memory. The simplest thing to do is to assert that the old veteran’s memory is
false because he is remembering the actions of a person who isn’t himself, which we have already
established. However, there is another approach that sheds additional light on the usefulness of
the soul-phase criterion. If we start with the old veteran, using the continuity of soul-phases
criterion we can progressively work our way back through various soul-phases until we arrive at
the cowardly soldier. This gives us a sequence of soul-phases starting at the cowardly soldier
and continuously moving forward in time to the old veteran. If we examine the memory of the
battle at each soul-phase, we will get a picture of how that memory came about. The soul-phase
of the cowardly soldier contains the experience of hiding while watching the brave officer and the
desire to be seen as a hero. A soul-phase occurring somewhat later contains the memory of
hiding while watching the officer as well as a fantasy of having been the one to capture the
standard. Still later we find a soul-phase in which the memory and the fantasy have become
hopelessly mixed, and so on until finally we arrive at a soul-phase in which the old veteran
actually remembers capturing the standard. Having done this, we would clearly be in a position
to explain how we know the old veteran’s memory to be false. Looking at the soul-phases shows
that the memory is the result, not of having performed the action, but rather of mixing a memory
with a fantasy. On the other hand, performing the same procedure for the old general/brave
officer would show that his memory comes directly from a soul-phase in which he experienced capturing the standard, thus showing his memory to be real. So to summarize, Quinton’s view allows us to distinguish real memories from false ones without a circular reference to personal identity. Unlike Locke’s view in which we look only at two soul-phases distant in time, Quinton’s view makes use of all of the soul-phases between the two so that we can track the development of memories. In particular, we use all of the person’s other memories and character traits to find his soul-phase sequence and then use this sequence to see how his memory came about. If it came about as a result of experiencing the relevant action it is real; if it came about by some type of self-deception or other “wrong” way it is false.

So Quinton’s revised Lockean view survives the cowardly soldier paradox and is able to explain personal identity without presupposing the same. However, a clever person might wish to strengthen Butler and Reid’s objection, just as Quinton strengthens Locke. The cause of Quinton’s success seems to be that he allows us to look at more than just one memory and two points in time; rather, we can consider the totality of a person’s memory and character and can see exactly how a person progresses in time from one soul-phase to another. So to challenge Quinton, we should propose a case in which more than one isolated memory is shared. Again, we consider the brave officer and the cowardly soldier. These two eventually evolve into the old general and the old soldier. However, instead of supposing that the old soldier simply shares one memory with the old general, we need to suppose that the two are virtually indistinguishable in regard to all of their memories and character traits. In that case, it seems that the old soldier has continuity with his own sequence of soul-phases but also has continuity with the sequence of soul-phases leading up to the old general, since he is so similar to the old general that only soul-phases similar to the general will also be similar to the veteran.

However, I will now argue that even if this example is modified as above Quinton is able to handle it. Consider the claim that the old general and the old veteran are almost indistinguishable. If there is any slight difference, then we can use that difference to distinguish them as follows. We simply need to insist that the soul-phases we consider be closer in time and
we correspondingly insist that the similarity between adjacent soul-phases be stronger to imply personal identity. Rather than taking soul-phases at one-day intervals and allowing enough variation for the general and veteran on Tuesday to both be similar (in the sense necessary for personal identity) to the general on Monday, we might take our soul-phases at one minute intervals and insist that the allowable difference for soul-phases still to be similar is even less than the small difference between the general and the veteran. We are really just refining our partition, and this allows us to distinguish the two. Since this can be done for any slight difference between the two, we have resolved the problem for every case except the case in which the soul-phases of the veteran and general are exactly the same.

So now the only question is whether Quinton can accommodate the case in which the general and the veteran have identical soul phases at some point. As might be expected, Quinton’s view will lead to some identification between the two. However, unlike the case of Locke and the brave officer paradox, I will argue that in this case these identities really do correspond with our intuitions. There are two ways in which the general and veteran can come to have identical soul-phases, and we shall first consider each in its pure form. First suppose that the two had very different pasts. In that case, for their “present” soul-phases to be identical each must have forgotten almost everything about his past, since if the general remembered doing anything that the veteran didn’t they would be distinguishable. In this case we would have to conclude that at the time at which the soul-phases of the general and the veteran became identical, neither had any memory of any prior instant, since at that prior instant they were not the same and thus the memories would be different; this point would thus constitute a complete break with the past. In this case, neither would be continuous with his past soul-phases, and so at this instant the person who was once the brave officer and the person who was once the cowardly soldier would no longer exist. Instead each body would be inhabited by a sort of “stock person,” a pair of complete amnesiacs each of which had an identical (probably not very interesting) character. So in this case we would indeed identify the general with the veteran, although neither would be identified with either the brave officer or the cowardly soldier. I claim that this
conclusion of Quinton’s theory does indeed match our intuition. In this case of complete amnesia and a sort of character coalescence, we would agree that the brave officer and the cowardly soldier no longer exist; everything relevant which made them who they were is gone. As for saying that the general and the veteran are the same person, it seems only a slight stretch to suppose this (a point which I will consider in more detail in a moment). After all, upon reflection, would we really wish to differentiate between two total amnesiacs with identical characters?

The other case would be if neither the general nor the veteran forgot very much about the past and kept their individual characters mostly intact. But then since we are assuming their soul-phases to be identical, the general’s detailed memories of his past must match the veteran’s detailed memories of his past. If the general remembers being the brave officer and everything that followed, then the veteran remembers these same things. The veteran could never have been the cowardly soldier since he has no memory at all associated with the life of the soldier and their characters bear no relation. Even if the bodies were the same, it seems more reasonable to say that the cowardly soldier’s body had its mind erased and replaced with an exact copy of the general’s mind. This is the same intuition Locke makes use of in his prince-cobbler illustration, and the intuition seems equally strong here (again, I will consider this in more detail in a moment) (Locke 43). Alternatively, if the veteran’s body had performed such actions as he remembers, it would seem we would be dealing with something like parallel universes. There would be two brave officer/generals, each having performed the same actions, having possessed the same character, albeit in different bodies. So the conclusion would have to be that the two lived parallel lives in parallel worlds. In this case too, we would accept the conclusion that they were the same person.

In the preceding two cases, I have delayed treatment of one point until now. Namely, what happens when we seem to have the same person inhabiting two different bodies? This arises either when both the general and the veteran are reduced to amnesiacs with identical characters or when the veteran’s mind is erased and replaced with a copy of the general’s mind.
In both cases I claimed that it was plausible and in line with our intuitions to regard these as the same person. First of all, we should note that these are extreme cases. Even if one isn’t willing to take a position on who’s who in these cases, one should still acknowledge that Quinton’s theory is able to handle all less bizarre cases, which includes every case that arises in our actual lives. That having been said, we shall tackle these challenging cases. It would seem to be a problem to have two bodies living side-by-side which we claimed were the same person. However, this cannot occur. Different bodies would result in different perceptual perspectives, which in turn would result in different experiences and memories. The only case in which different bodies would not result in different perceptual perspectives would be in a case like a parallel universe. Perhaps we could imagine the parallelism being local, that is, something like two identical rooms both of which reside in the same universe in the usual sense. So the intuitions here aren’t as strong. Nonetheless, it at least seems plausible to say that in such cases we have the same person with two different bodies. The alternative, saying that the two bodies are different people, seems equally unattractive upon reflection. If two people are different, then one shouldn’t be able to swap them without noticing any difference, it would seem, yet that is exactly the case we have. So even though these challenging cases stretch our intuitions, it seems that Quinton’s theory is at least a plausible account of what is happening with personal identity in these cases.

A tenacious opponent will observe that these two pure cases do not exhaust all cases. One might imagine various combinations of the two; for example, that the general and veteran lived similar lives and forgot the different parts while remembering the similar parts, or some other such scenario. While I won’t explore these, I hope that the above two cases give sufficient reason for supposing that Quinton’s theory works in all such similar cases which are merely combinations of the above. The point seems to be that there’s really no problem unless the souls- phases become perfectly identical at some point, an event which seems extremely bizarre in its own right. Further, even if that happens, our intuition agrees with Quinton’s theory that it is possible for a person to be destroyed be amnesia, etc., and a different person take his place in
that body, and also that it is possible for two different bodies to be the same person, as in some sort of parallel universe.

So we see that Quinton’s modification of Locke’s view is able to withstand the brave officer paradox. More generally, Quinton allows us to define personal identity and distinguish real and false memories in a non-circular fashion, that is without reference to personal identity. Further, if one attempts to modify the brave officer paradox to refute Quinton, one is forced into fairly bizarre scenarios which do indeed seem to disrupt personal identity in the way Quinton’s theory predicts. The strength of the brave officer paradox is that everyone acknowledges the old veteran to be different from the brave officer. In passing to a modified form of the paradox to oppose Quinton, this central intuition is lost, thus allowing Quinton to survive the assault. As such, a Lockean style theory of personal identity still seems to be the best available.
Works Cited


