

Chapter One

Introduction

IT'S WIDELY HELD that Locke's account of personal identity, first published in 1694, is circular and inconsistent, and blatantly so. Locke, however, thought long and hard about the matter.¹ He discussed it extensively with friends and colleagues, and was a profoundly intelligent, generally very careful, and exceptionally sensible philosopher. He made no foolish error.

Why has he been so misunderstood? I blame certain influential commentators, in whose vanguard one finds one of the worst readers of other philosophers in the history of philosophy: the good Bishop Berkeley. Thomas Reid is also to blame, for although he is a great (and often funny) philosopher, and sometimes accurate enough in his renderings of the views of his predecessors, he enjoys mockery too much to be reliable, he's too free with the word "absurd," and his misreading of Locke's views on personal identity, which follows Berkeley's, is spectacular.² Bishop Butler is the other

¹ His central thought on the question was in place by 1683; see Ayers 1990: 2.255.

² Berkeley 1732: 304–5, Reid 1785: §3.6. Reid also follows Berkeley in mistakenly attributing to Locke the view that secondary qualities are in the mind (1764: §6.6). He makes many other such errors.

main reprobate, although the objection to Locke for which he is well known is not his, having been put by John Sergeant in 1697 and by Henry Lee in 1702, among others.³

History has designated Butler and Reid as the main representatives of the circularity and inconsistency objections, and their influence has been such that few since then have had a chance to read what Locke wrote without prejudice. The tide of misunderstanding was already high in 1769, when Edmund Law provided an essentially correct account of Locke's position in his *Defence of Mr. Locke's Opinion Concerning Personal Identity*. His intervention was, however, little noticed.

The extent of the misreading of Locke is remarkable. Edmund Law judged it an "endless" task to "unravel all the futile sophisms and false suppositions, that have been introduced into the present question"; he "endeavoured [only] to obviate such as appeared most material, and account for them" (1769: 36). If, however, one embarks on Locke's discussion confident that his view will not contain any glaring error, it becomes hard to understand how he can have been so misread for so long. For he makes his central point extremely plain, and he does so, it must be said, over and over and over again. To read the wonderfully fluent and imaginative text of 2.27 of *An Essay concerning Human Understanding* is to see how familiar Locke is with his material, how easy in exposition he is, how he has thought through the objections, and how much he's enjoying himself. Locke likes to vary his terms, and is sometimes loose of expression by modern lights, but not in a way that makes it possible for a moder-

³ Butler 1736: 441. Sergeant picked up the objection for which Butler is known from a debate in which Robert South (1693) made it validly against a proposal by William Sherlock (1690). See Ayers 1990: 2.257, 269; Thiel 1998: 875–77, 898. Leibniz does not make it in his *Nouveaux Essais*, contrary to the initial appearance (c. 1704: 236 [2.27.9]).

ately careful reader to misread him in the manner of Butler, Berkeley, Reid, and many who have followed them.⁴

The following essay records my line of thought as I read and reread, and sometimes struggled with, Locke's chapter. I spend the next several sections introducing a number of distinctions that I believe to be useful, extracting some central notions for inspection—notably *person*, *consciousness*, *concernment*—before returning them to context. The discussion lacks a standard expository structure, and it's not meant to be introductory. I assume basic familiarity with Locke's text, and criticize other accounts of it only indirectly. I think that almost all the elements of a correct view of his theory of personal identity are now to be found in the writings of a few Locke scholars, among whom Udo Thiel stands out,⁵ but misunderstanding is still widespread in the philosophical community as a whole.

The interpretative situation was hardly better in the eighteenth century, as just observed.⁶ Law was honestly amazed that Locke had been so “miserably misunderstood”—that so many “ingenious writers” had been “so marvellously mistaken” about Locke's views on personal identity, and had engaged in so much irrelevant and “egregious trifling” on the matter (1769: 23, 21). Law cites, as an “extraordinary instance” (p. 22) of this trifling, the inconsistency argument that Berkeley gave in his *Alciphron* (1732), and for a version of which Reid later became famous (see p. 53 below).⁷

⁴ Mackie sufficiently answers the Butler objection in *Problems from Locke* (1976: 186–87).

⁵ See, e.g. Thiel 1998, 2011.

⁶ See Thiel 2011, chap. 4.

⁷ “Many historians of philosophy, with all their intended praise, . . . attribute mere nonsense . . . to past philosophers. They are incapable of recognizing, beyond what the philosophers actually said, what they really meant to say” (Kant 1790: 160). “If we take single passages, torn from

The root cause of the misunderstanding, perhaps, is the tendency of most of Locke's readers to take the term "person" as if it were only a sortal term of a standard kind, i.e. a term for a standard temporal continuant, like "human being" or "thinking thing," without paying sufficient attention to the fact that Locke is focusing on the use of "person" as a "forensic" term (§26), i.e. a term that finds its principal use in contexts in which questions about the attribution of responsibility (praise and blame, punishment and reward) are foremost. No doubt it's natural enough to take "person" only in the first way, but this doesn't excuse the perversity of doing so when reading what Locke says, and says again and again. (The common mistake of thinking that Locke means memory by "consciousness" is, relatively speaking, a smaller mistake.) That said, Locke must also bear some of the responsibility for the misreading—a point addressed by Law in the brief appendix to his *Defence*.

their context, and compare them with one another, contradictions are not likely to be lacking, especially in a work that is written with any freedom of expression . . . ; but they are easily resolved by those who have mastered the idea of the whole" (Kant 1787: Bxliv).