# Personal identity transcript

## Speaker 1

The question of identity is the question of how does something change and remain the very same thing we all change over the years.

We change enormously, but we believe that we stay exactly the same person underneath. What is that person that stays the same? How do we stay the same if we change so much?

This was a question that Locke addressed.

Locke said that what was essential to someone being the same person was not actually having the same body, but having the same connected series of experiences.

So if you could connect your experience by memory to your experiences in the past, that was what guaranteed that you were the same person.

The ancient question of identity is the question of when things are the same and when they're different.

This is particularly pressing when you consider that things can change over time. How can something stay the same if all of its properties and qualities over time can change?

Thomas Hobbes illustrated this with the question of the ship of Theseus.

Theseus, the ancient hero, had his ship left in the harbour, and let's suppose year by year the planks of the ship were repaired.

After a while there were none of the original planks of the ship of Theseus there, but the ship of Theseus was still there in the dock.

Now suppose that someone had kept the planks that were removed, and they built a new ship out of that.

Which one would have been the ship of Theseus, the one that's in the dock? Or the new one that they've just built?

The new one has the original matter, but the one that's in the dock is connected through a chain of replacement to the original ship.

Does it matter?

Maybe not.

Maybe we can call one the ship of Theseus one and the other one the ship of Theseus two.

But things seem very different when we consider people because it really matters to us whether it's the same person that you're meeting after 20 years, or whether your husband or your wife is the same person that you saw last night.

Surely that's a very very important question and not a trivial one. What makes us the same person from day to day?

Locke’s answer was that it was not the matter that makes us the same person, but rather our minds are psychological continuity.

The connection that we have to our past through our memories through our past experiences and our past lives.

That psychological continuity was the essence of personal identity for Locke.

This has become almost the dominant view in contemporary philosophy and has been defended skillfully by the Oxford philosopher Derek Parfit.

## Speaker 3

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.

## Speaker 2

What is it that makes me the same person as I was yesterday or a week ago or 10 years ago?

This is not just a theoretical question, because if you think that people should be held responsible for their actions, then if I did some bad thing last week, I now am responsible for it and should maybe be punished.

But that only works if I am genuinely the same person as I was a week ago, so we need to understand what personal identity, the identity of a person over time, consists in.

Now, in Locke's day, most people would have said that this was a matter of having a soul.

What makes me the same now as I was ten years ago is that there is a single, indivisible soul which constitutes my identity.

But Locke couldn't say this.

Because Locke was seriously agnostic about the notion of substances. He did believe in something like a soul, a mental substance that underlies my existence, but since we cannot know whether the same mental substance persists over time, I am aware of my thoughts from one moment to the other, but I'm never aware of that underlying mental substance.

It means that if we locate personal identity and hence personal responsibility in a soul, we never have any way of knowing whether that responsibility is genuinely carried forward over time.

Another important factor here is the belief in immortality, in divine judgement.

If when I die my physical body is destroyed, but I end up being judged in the afterlife by God, what is it that makes the me that is judged in the afterlife the same as the me that did those good or bad things in this life?

Again, Locke wants to look for a basis in personal identity that can make sense of carrying responsibility over time, but doesn't leave us completely in the dark as to its basis.

Locke locates personal identity in consciousness. What makes me the same person now, as I was a week ago, is that I'm conscious of being the same individual. conscious of my past actions. I remember them.

And so the essence of personal identity lies in memory.

To illustrate this, Locke gives a very famous thought experiment about the soul of the prince carrying with it the consciousness of the prince’s past life.

So that when the prince’s body wakes up in the morning, it has all the memories of the cobbler. And when the cobbler's body wakes up in the same morning, it has all the memories of the prince.

Everyone sees, Locke says, that the body of the cobbler would be the same person with the prince accountable only for the prince’s actions because the cobbler's body has all the thoughts and memories of the prince, not those of the cobbler.

And that, according to Locke, makes sense of our attributions of responsibility both through time in this life and in an afterlife.

