

The Irreducibility Theory of Self



Thomas Reid

...Reid Continued

- Theories of identity that we have already examined all attempt to understand identity by reduction
- Descartes believed that the Self could be reduced to the soul
- Locke argued that consciousness is what keeps a person the same over time
- Reid believes that trying to reduce identity into smaller sets is counter-intuitive
- What is Reid's solution?

Reid's solution



- “We are who we are”
- That is, ourselves are just ourselves
- There is no further simplification of identity

Initial Claim

- “The conviction which every man has of his identity, as far back as his memory reaches, needs no aid of philosophy to strengthen it; and no philosophy can weaken it, without first producing some degree of insanity” (Reid 343).
- Asserts the strength of humans’ belief in their own personal identity over time
- Personal identity is a simple, common sense concept

But...

- Reid has no concrete definition of the self
- “If you ask a definition of identity, I confess I can give none; it is too simple a notion to admit logical definition; I can say it is a relation, but I cannot find words to express the specific difference between this and other relations, though I am in no danger of confounding it with any other” (Reid 344).
- Is Reid just giving in to the complexity of identity? Is it possible that something is too simple to be explained?

- We can only distinguish the relationship with the self from every other relation
- Trying to define the self in terms of smaller parts is unrealistic
- “My thoughts, and actions, and feelings change every moment; they have no continued, but a successive, existence; but that *self*, or *I*, to which they belong, is permanent and has the same relation to all the succeeding thoughts, actions, and feelings which I call mine” (Reid 344).
- When we think, act, or feel; we do not change
- The self is an overseer of thoughts, actions, and feelings

A simple self

- “A part of a person is a manifest absurdity. When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person, and has not lost nothing of his personality. If he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person he was before” (Reid 344).
- The self is defined by having no parts
- Reid’s stance allows him to pick and choose parts of theories

A continuous self

- One of Reid's main objections to Locke's theory of consciousness was the idea of continuity
- “..this would be to suppose a being to exist after it ceased to exist, and to have had existence before it was produced, which are manifest contradictions. Continued, uninterrupted existence is therefore necessarily implied in identity” (Reid 344a).
- Reid believes that continuity is implied in identity
- This view allows for mobility over various mental stages

Memory

- “I remember several things that passed in that conversation: my memory testifies, not only that this was done but that it was done by me who now remember it” (Reid 344).
- “It is not my remembering any action of mine that makes me to be the same person who did it. This remembrance makes me to know assuredly that I did it; but I might have done it, though I did not remember it” (Reid 345).
- Memory can be used as evidence of a permanent self but at the same time we cannot use it as a measure of ourselves
- Are the two quotations contradictory? How can he use memory as evidence of a permanent self and also think it not essential?