Hello. Welcome to what will be one of two lectures on John Locke’s theories of personhood and personal identity. The title I have for this lecture is Consciousness, Persons and Responsibility. John Locke, though roughly a contemporary of Descartes — he’s a little bit later — is going to come at this whole cluster of issues from an entirely different direction, a very interestingly different direction, so I’m looking forward to seeing what you all think of his views as opposed to Descartes.

The key distinction for Descartes, remember, is between mind and body which he literally thinks are different entities. That is, they work in tandem with each other, they’re related to one another, but that mind and body are separate entities and they’re comprised of different substances, that they’re made of different stuff. Remember that Descartes believes this largely because of the things he believes in the scientific realm. Descartes, as I told you in the little biography I gave, was part of the vanguard of the scientific revolution, was an accomplished scientist and mathematician himself, and really was on the cutting edge of scientific and mathematical knowledge of his day. Much of the views that he has on the mind and on the body are the result of the science of his time and to the extent to which the science of his time is dated, which of course it is, his views on mind and body are dated.

We’re going to find that Locke’s views don’t date quite as much as Descartes’ views do, because Locke’s views come from an entirely different direction and from a direction — from a point of knowledge which is not in a sense datable. That will become clearer. As I’m saying it, I’m realizing that’s sort of mysterious. It’ll become clearer as we move forward.

For Locke, the key distinction is not between mind and body but between person and human being or persons and human beings. He thinks that this distinction need not rest on any differences in substance at all. In other words, Locke’s view, I will argue and I think is pretty well supported by the text — Locke’s view does not have any
dualistic implications whatsoever. For Locke, in a sense, we have two different ways of describing a single entity. So conceive of an individual human being as a single entity. Locke thinks that we can describe — that we can conceive this entity under the description *human being* or we can conceive of this entity under the description *person*, but that these two different descriptions are not merely semantic variance. They have very different connotations. That is, to think of a person as a human being has very different implications than to think of them as a person.

Let me make some brief remarks on John Locke — on the person, on his personality, on who he was, biographical remarks. I will then give a little overview of some of Locke’s basic thinking about the concept of identity and then we’ll leave the substantial stuff about persons and personhood and personal identity until the next lecture.

John Locke — if Descartes is one of the most famous of the modern French thinkers — and remember, when we use the word *modern* in philosophy we mean the period spanning the 17th and 18th centuries — then John Locke was certainly the most famous of the English philosophers of the modern era. He was by training a medical doctor and was the personal physician to Lord Ashley Cooper, the first Earl of Shaftesbury, who was an influential Whig politician and was a philosopher in his own right, and his views had a great deal of influence on Locke.

Locke is the most influential proponent of the philosophical — I don’t want to call it a school, because it isn’t a school — but the philosophical, let’s call it, style known as empiricism. Empiricism is the view that all human knowledge begins and sends experience. Locke was the most famous and the clearest proponent and expositor of this view. He also was one of the chief architects of classical liberal political philosophy. I mean liberal in the sense simply of — in the classic sense of an individualist political philosophy. That is, a political philosophy that places the
individual at the — the individual, his rights, and his liberties and his happiness at the center of politics. All of the modern western countries — United States, Great Britain, France — are all liberal in this sense. Of course, the word *liberal* has taken on all sorts of other meanings, especially over the last 20 or 30 years. It’s taken on some very sort of partisan meanings which are not a part of its original sense. In the sense that John Locke is a liberal, all the countries of the west are liberal.

This indeed probably is Locke’s greatest, most lasting contribution is his contribution to political thought. We will revisit Locke’s political thought towards the last part of the course. Suffice it simply to say here that Locke’s political philosophy had a greater influence on the United States Constitution, Declaration of Independence, on the United States system of government and way of thinking about politics than any other single philosopher. His views are at the heart of what it is to be a country like ours. And so it’s very important that we study him and that we study his political thought.

That’s not what we’re doing right now. Right now we’re studying Locke’s ideas on persons, on personhood, and on personal identity. But you’ll even see here that there are important significant connections between his conceptions of persons and politics. The connection is via the idea of responsibility. For Locke, person, the word person, is fundamentally a moral and a legal term, where human being, the word human being, is a biological term. So when we refer to an individual under the description human, we are calling to attention his purely biological existence. When we refer to someone under the rubric of person, Locke says, we are indicating his moral and legal characteristics, specifically his obligations on the one hand and his rights and privileges and prerogatives on the other.

So there’s a direct relationship between Locke’s conception of persons on the one hand, which is what we’re talking about in this part of the course, and his politics
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which we'll be talking about in the latter part of the course via this idea of responsibility and via this idea that it is by virtue of being persons that we have responsibility, both moral and legal. This will all become clearer as we get into the details.

Now, let me just say a few things about Locke’s general thinking on the subject of identity and then we'll wrap up for this lecture and we'll leave the details to next time. So this will be a relatively short one and the next one will probably be a little bit longer.

Identity, of course, is a notion that comes from mathematics. In other words, the equal sign is the symbol that we have that denotes the relation of identity, $A = B$. $A$ is identical with $B$. And the mathematical or strict definition of identity goes something like this. I think I may have said this in a previous lecture but it’s worth repeating. The strict mathematical notion of identity says something like this. Two things, $X$ and $Y$, are identical. That is, $X = Y$. If and only if, for any property $P$, if $X$ is $P$, then $Y$ is $P$, and vice versa. Put in ordinary language, what this says is two things are identical just in case they have all the same properties.

Now, Locke recognizes that this mathematical notion of identity is simply unsuitable to most of our uses of the word identical, same, different. In other words, when we use these words in ordinary speech, we can’t possibly mean the mathematical notion of identity. When I go out into my driveway and say, “That’s my car,” I’m implying that it’s the same car that I bought. That’s what makes it mine. But what I mean by same can’t be the mathematical notion of identity. Because, of course, in that sense it’s not the same car. So perhaps I bought the car 10 years ago. When I bought the car it was blue. But because, let’s say, I hate blue, I’ve since then painted the car red. Now, the car is my car which means that it’s the same car that I bought. That’s what makes it mine, is that I paid for it and I have the title. Yet from the mathematical notion of identity it would not be the same car because it does not have exactly the same properties of the car that I bought. For one thing, it’s a different color.
Notice if even one atom of the car is different from what it was when it was bought, it is not the same car on the mathematical notion of identity.

So on the one hand we have these words that we use in ordinary speech all the time -- same, different, mine, yours — all of which implicate some notion of identity. On the other hand, we have the strict mathematical notion of identity which cannot possibly be what we mean when we use those words in ordinary contexts. And so one of the things that we’re trying — that Locke wants to try and clarify, it’s what are the different senses of identity that we work with when we talk about different things. And Locke here has really a general — sort of a general rule about discussions of identity, and the general rule is that our conception of identity should fit the thing that we’re talking about. That there isn’t or shouldn’t be one notion of identity that is applied to all things but, rather, that our notion of identity should fit comfortably to the things that we’re talking about.

Therefore, we may have multiple notions of identity. When we talk about cars as opposed to talking about numbers, we mean very different things when we use the word same. When we say $3 = 2.1$ — all right -- 3 is the same as 2.1. We don’t mean the same thing by same as when we say, “This car is the same one that I bought 10 years ago.” And what Locke wants to do in the early parts of the reading that you have is, first, state this general rule that the principle of identity should suit the thing that we’re talking about and then try to identify some of the different notions of identity that we work with in ordinary speech.

Now, with respect to this general rule about identity, let me just read you the relevant quotation. You’ll notice throughout the course that I do this. I think it is very important that you see in the text where these philosophers are saying the things that I’m saying that they’re saying. I mean, I’m trying also to aid you in your reading. Maybe by providing you with certain benchmarks within the text from the lecture, will
facilitate your reading of the text on your own.

I'm here on page 445 of your reading, paragraph 8. Here's what Locke has to say on the subject of identity in general:

To concede and judge of it a right [that is, to conceive and judge of identity correctly], we must consider what idea that word is applied to and what it stands for. It being one thing to be the same substance, another the same man, and a third the same person if person, man, and substance are three names standing for three different ideas. For such as is the idea belonging to that name, such must be the identity.

So here we have Locke sort of — with a very clear way of laying it out, saying, “Look. Depending on what we’re talking about, we may have a different notion of identity.” It’s one thing to talk about the same pebble. It’s another thing to talk about the same dog. It’s another thing to talk about the same tree, it’s another thing to talk about the same person, it’s another thing to talk about the same number. What we mean by same may be different in each case and what we mean by same should be suitable to each case.

Locke then proceeds to give some basic identity conditions for different types of things. What he’s gonna do is he’s gonna start from the smallest sorts of things, what he calls atoms, and work his way up to the identity conditions for more and more complex things until we arrive at the point of persons. And what I'll do today is I'll go up through but not including persons. So we'll get right up to the discussion of persons and we'll stop there and leave the discussion of persons until next time.

Of course, Locke is writing before — much earlier to, prior to — the development of physics as we know it today. He is essentially an atomist. That is, he believes — he understands that big things are made out of littler pieces — smaller pieces — but he doesn’t have sense of atomic structure in the way that we understand it today. Locke
is what’s called the corpuscularian. He literally believes that all big things are made up of little things, and ultimately that things are made out of these tiny little bits of matter, bits of physical substance. Which he calls atoms. So his first account of identity conditions is going to be for atoms, individual atoms, and for compounds — that is, more than one atom attached together. And his principle of identity here is very simple and it’s as close as we will get to the mathematical notion of identity.

So let’s take any atom and call it atom A. It remains identical so long as it remains atom A. Once it turns into something else, atom B, it is no longer the same. Now, this is as close as we get to the mathematical notion of identity. Notice it’s not quite the mathematical notion of identity because atom A remains atom A even over the passage of time. So at T1 if it’s atom A and let’s say a year later a T2 if it’s still atom A we would say it’s the same atom. But on a mathematical notion of identity, being a year older is, of course, a property and it is a property that atom A at T2 have that atom A at T1 does not have. So on the strict mathematical notion of identity, atom A at T1 and atom A at T2 would not be identical. But the conception of identity that applies to atoms — that is, to simple basic substances — is as close to the mathematical notion of identity as any notion of identity that we work with outside of mathematics.

Similarly, for compounds — for Locke a compound is simply two or more atoms conjoined. He does not have a conception of compounds, of molecules in the way that we think of them, where the parts, the different pieces, depending on how they’re arranged may comprise different compounds even if all the pieces are the same. For him, a compound is simply defined by its constituents. So the compound consisting of atoms A and B and the compound consisting of atoms B and A are identical for him because they have the same constituents. So for Locke, two compounds are identical just in case they have identical constituents. So if the initial compound is made up of A and B, any other compound that’s made of A and B or B and A, whatever order, is the
same compound, is identical with the first.

So just to quote him on page 442 in your reading — this is a continuation of paragraph 4 from the previous page, page 442 — he says,

Let us suppose an atom — i.e., a continued body — existing in a determined time and place. It is evident that, considering in any instance of its existence, it is in that instance the same with itself. For being in that instance, what it is and nothing else, it is the same and so must continue as long as its existence is continued. In like manner, if two or more atoms be joined together into the same mass, every one of those atoms will be the same by the foregoing rule. While they exist united together, the mass consisting of the same atoms must be the same mass or the same body, let the parts be ever so differently jumbled. But if one of these atoms be taken away or one new one added, it's no longer the same mass of the same body.

So if you have a pile of 37 pebbles and you mix 'em all up, but you keep exactly the same pebbles, you have two identical piles. But if you remove one pebble or add another pebble, you now have a different pile. Because a pile is simply defined by the collection of things that's in it.

Now, here's where we get to the interesting — here's where the questions of identity start to get interesting. When we move away from mere piles of material or piles of matter to living things. If you recall, the question I left you with last time was whether — what's the difference between a dog and a pile of dog parts. I said to you that it was a very weird sounding question until the heard the context. Well, now I'm hoping that now that we've arrived at the context, the question won't seem so strange.

How is a dog different from a pile of stones? Of course, a dog is made of physical parts, physical pieces. In that sense a dog is a compound in Locke's sense. He's a collection of parts. But notice a dog is not merely a collection of parts. If,
heavens forbid, I was to disassemble your dog or your cat and pile up all the parts in a nice, neat pile, and assume that I have not left out one item of your dog or cat, nonetheless you would say, “That’s not my dog or cat.” Indeed, that’s not a dog or cat at all. It is simply a pile of dog or cat parts. The question arises, what is the difference between a living thing and a pile of parts, a pile of its parts? Locke asked the question very straightforwardly on page 443, top of paragraph 5: “We must consider therefore wherein an oak differs from a mass of matter.” Hey, we don’t need to be so gruesome with the dog and the cat. We can talk about plants. Imagine I cut down an oak tree and I save every single piece and simply put them in a pile. You would say, “Well, that’s not the same tree. Indeed, that’s not a tree at all.” But what is it that makes the oak an oak? And given what makes an oak an oak or a dog a dog or a cat a cat, what is the relevant principle of identity? How do we know when we have the same cat, the same dog, and the same oak, and how do we know when we have a different one?

Because notice something else that’s interesting about living things as opposed to compounds — that is, opposed to piles of matter. If you give your dog a haircut, it’s still the same dog. But if you take a pebble out of the pile, it’s no longer the same pile of pebbles. That is, a living thing — the identity conditions for a living thing allow for far greater numbers of changes than the identity conditions for a compound. In other words, the identity conditions for compounds are much stricter, closer to the mathematical conception of identity, than the identity conditions that we ordinarily — that is, in ordinary speech -- apply to living things.

And so what Locke says is he says, “Look. What’s different about a living thing than a mere compound is that a living thing is not merely a collection of physical parts but a collection of physical parts arranged in such a way so as to contribute to a physical life.” The difference between the dog and the pile of dog parts is that in the dog the parts are arranged in such a way and work together in such a way to create a
life. And it is in the life, in that biological life, that the identity of the dog rests. And so long as that life continues, the identity of the dog is preserved. That’s why you can shave your dog, your dog — heavens forbid again — might lose a leg in an accident, it’s still the same dog. Because the relevant notion of identity applies not to its parts and pieces — after all, it’s not simply a compound — but applies rather at the level of its life, at the level of its organic life, to which the parts and the pieces contribute when they are properly arranged and organized.

That’s why we’re continuing on where we were reading from before with the example of the oak, on page 443.

We must consider wherein an oak differs from a mass of matter and that seems to need to be in this. That the one is only the cohesion of particles of matter anyhow united. The other sets a disposition of them as constitutes the part of an oak, and such an organization of those parts is as fit to receive and distribute nourishment, so as to continue and frame the wood, bark and leaves, etc., of an oak, in which consists the vegetable life.

So we’re talking about living things and not merely about compounds. Our focus, the relevant focus which we apply our principle of identity is not at the level of the parts but at the level of the life to which the parts contribute. Thus, the identity conditions apply at the level of life, not at the level of the parts. And so long as the same life continues, the same organism or the same plant continues, irrespective of what parts change.

Notice the same is true with machines. Because machines, like living things, are not simply collections of parts but parts organized together and functioning towards a larger purpose. If I replaced the hard drive in my computer, if I replaced the monitor, it’s still the same computer. Because the relevant level at which we pitch the conditions of identity for a machine are at the level of its functions, not at the level of its
parts and pieces. And Locke says this is true of the identity conditions. Not only of animals, plants and machines, but at the level of human beings. Insofar as we are human beings, insofar as we are living organisms, under that description, the relevant identity conditions apply at the level of our ongoing life. So long as I am participating in the same life, I am the same human being as I was when I was 5 years old even though all the parts and pieces have changed over time. I remain the same human because the same continuing life is going on.

The thing we’re gonna talk about next — where we’re gonna go next is the identity conditions for persons. First of all, what is a person? In what ways — how is it different to describe an individual as a person rather than as a human being? And given that difference, what are the relevant identity conditions? And then what are the implications of personhood and of personal identity. Locke thinks the implications are massive and important, and particularly have to do with ethics and with law.

So next time we’ll be talking about John Locke on persons, personal identity, and the relationship of personhood and personal identity to moral and legal questions. I’m going to leave you with three things to think about while you’re reading. First, does Locke’s conception of persons have dualistic implications? Now, I said that they don’t but teachers can be wrong. You can disagree. Things in philosophy, I hope you’re seeing, are not so black and white. And so I’m asking you from your reading to determine whether you think Locke’s conceptions of persons have dualistic implications or not and why or why not.

Second, why does Locke attach moral and legal responsibility to us inasmuch as we are persons rather than inasmuch as we are human beings? In other words, why is it only under the description of being persons that moral and legal responsibilities come into play as opposed to being under the description of human beings?

And third, what are the practical limits to the connection of moral and legal
responsibility with personhood? In other words, Locke is gonna say something to the effect of, “Look. The extent to which we have legal and moral obligations and responsibilities is the extent to which we are persons.” But he’s also going to say that there are practical limits to this connection. That is, that there may be moral and legal considerations that do not permit us to take into account personhood.

And so I want you to see if you can identify what he says are the practical limits of the connection of moral and legal responsibility with personhood. And so we will pick this up next time. Thank you very much.