

This is What I Believe about What I Am

Most people think they know a lot about what they are. But if you actually sit them down and ask them the question--"What are you?"--they will most likely come up with an answer having little to do with what they *really* are. In many cases, they might state their occupations or hobbies. The question of what you are, however, reaches for something deeper than merely what you do.

In my initial paper, I attempted to answer the question of what I am much like anyone else would. I said that I am a student and tutor, an avid reader and writer, and an exceptional guitarist. But am I really nothing more than a collection of the things I do?

In a way, I have come to understand that perhaps I am not much more than this. However, I have revised this statement to say that I am not merely a collection of things I do, but rather a collection of ideas formulated through perceptions of my environment, a position I can attribute largely to the philosophy of John Locke.

According to Locke, our personal identity, our "self"--another way of saying what we are--is something which is formed through perception (340). Much like Descartes, Locke believes

that we are thinking things, or as he puts it, each of us is a "thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places" (340). Locke implies that we are not only thinking things, but also that this thinking is accompanied by a consciousness, and that "as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person" (340).

In other words, we are a collection of ideas not only conscious of the present, but of the past. Our memory plays a key role in defining us, as it is through the veil of all of our past experiences that we must view our present ones.

In essence, Locke links our identities with a theory known as the *tabula rasa*, a Latin term meaning "blank slate." According to this theory, we are at birth an empty entity which has no real, inherent knowledge. Everything we know comes from our environment, from our unique experiences and perceptions. This can be likened to what Locke describes as the consciousness. It is our conscious experience, our experience and perception of the world, which formulates the ideas that make us who we are. Our unique environments present us with objects, which we sense as images, sounds, tastes, smells, or

feelings, and it is from these senses that we formulate our perceptions and ideas of the world.

To this end, we never actually see the world as it truly exists. As the *tabula rasa* relates, we begin forming our own perceptions the moment we are born into our environment. We make memories. And as we know from Locke, the consciousness extending backwards to past actions and thoughts, we can never be completely free from the veil of our past experience. Every idea we formulate will in turn shape our perception of the next one. Our past experiences influence our present ones, and it is through these experiences that our identities are shaped.

So what am I? Initially, I thought I was a collection of hobbies and professions. But I have come to understand, with the help of Locke, that the things I do are merely manifestations of my ideas and perceptions of the world. I was born a blank slate, but the conscious experience, both past and present, has written upon me the memories and ideas that make me what I am today. A book in which the world writes.

This is what I am.

Works Cited

Locke, John. "Of Identity and Diversity." *Twenty Questions: an Introduction to Philosophy*. Ed. G. Lee Bowie, Meredith W. Michaels, and Robert C. Solomon. Australia: Wadsworth/Cengage Learning, 2011. 339-343. Print.