



## Identity

### Voltaire

This scientific term signifies no more than “the same thing.” It might be correctly, translated by “sameness.” This subject is of considerably more interest than may be imagined. All agree that the guilty person only ought to be punished—the individual perpetrator, and no other. But a man fifty years of age is not in reality the same individual as the man of twenty; he retains no longer any of the parts which then formed his body; and if he has lost the memory of past events, it is certain that there is nothing left to unite his actual existence to an existence which to him is lost.

I am the same person only by the consciousness of what I have been combined with that of what I am; I have no consciousness of my past being but through memory; memory alone, therefore, establishes the identity, the sameness of my person.

We may, in truth, be naturally and aptly resembled to a river, all whose waters pass away in perpetual change and flow. It is the same river as to its bed, its banks, its source, its mouth, everything, in short, that is not itself; but changing every moment its waters, which constitute its very being, it has no identity; there is no sameness belonging to the river.

Were there another Xerxes like him who lashed the Hellespont for disobedience, and ordered for it a pair of handcuffs; and were the son of this Xerxes to be drowned in the Euphrates, and the father desirous of punishing that river for the death of his son, the Euphrates might very reasonably say in its vindication: “Blame the waves that were rolling on at the time your son was bathing; those waves belong not to me, and form no part of me; they have passed on to the Persian Gulf; a part is mixed with the salt water of that sea, and another part, exhaled in vapor, has been impelled by a south-east wind to Gaul, and been incorporated with endives and lettuces, which the Gauls have since used in their salads; seize the culprit where you can find him.”

It is the same with a tree, a branch of which broken by the wind might have fractured the skull of your great grandfather. It is no longer the same tree; all its parts have given way to others. The branch which killed your great grandfather is no part of this tree; it exists no longer.

It has been asked, then, how a man, who has totally lost his memory before his death, and whose members have been changed into other substances, can be punished for his faults or rewarded for his virtues when he is no longer himself? I have read in a well known book the following question and answer:

“Question. How can I be either rewarded or punished when I shall no longer exist; when there will be nothing remaining of that which constituted my person? It is only by means of memory that I am always myself; after my death, a miracle will be necessary to restore it to me—to enable me to re-enter upon my lost existence.

“Answer. That is just as much as to say that if a prince had put to death his whole family, in order to reign himself, and if he had tyrannized over his subjects with the most wanton cruelty, he would be exempted from punishment on pleading before God, ‘I am not the offender; I have lost my memory; you are under a mistake; I am no longer the same person.’ Do you think this

sophism would pass with God?”

This answer is a highly commendable one; but it does not completely solve the difficulty.

It would be necessary for this purpose, in the first place, to know whether understanding and sensation are a faculty given by God to man, or a created substance; a question which philosophy is too weak and uncertain to decide.

It is necessary in the next place to know whether, if the soul be a substance and has lost all knowledge of the evil it has committed, and be, moreover, as perfect a stranger to what it has done with its own body, as to all the other bodies of our universe—whether, in these circumstances, it can or should, according to our manner of reasoning, answer in another universe for actions of which it has not the slightest knowledge; whether, in fact, a miracle would not be necessary to impart to this soul the recollection it no longer possesses, to render it consciously present to the crimes which have become obliterated and annihilated in its mind, and make it the same person that it was on earth; or whether God will judge it nearly in the same way in which the presidents of human tribunals proceed, condemning a criminal, although he may have completely forgotten the crimes he has actually committed. He remembers them no longer; but they are remembered for him; he is punished for the sake of the example. But God cannot punish a man after his death with a view to his being an example to the living. No living man knows whether the deceased is condemned or absolved. God, therefore, can punish him only because he cherished and accomplished evil desires; but if, when after death he presents himself before the tribunal of God, he no longer entertains any such desire; if for a period of twenty years he has totally forgotten that he did entertain such; if he is no longer in any respect the same person; what is it that God will punish in him?

These are questions which appear beyond the compass of the human understanding, and there seems to exist a necessity, in these intricacies and labyrinths, of recurring to faith alone, which is always our last asylum.

Lucretius had partly felt these difficulties, when in his third book (verses 890-91) he describes a man trembling at the idea of what will happen to him when he will no longer be the same man:

Nec radicitus e vita se tollit et evit;  
Sed facit esse sui quiddam super inscius ipse.

But Lucretius is not the oracle to be addressed, in order to obtain any discoveries of the future.

The celebrated Toland, who wrote his own epitaph, concluded it with these words: “*Idem futurus Tolandus nunquam*”—“He will never again be the same Toland.”

However, it may be presumed that God would have well known how to find and restore him, had such been his good pleasure; and it is to be presumed, also, that the being who necessarily exists, is necessarily good.

---

Voltaire. “Philosophical Dictionary.” *The Works of Voltaire: A Contemporary Version*. Trans. William Felming. New York: E.R. DuMont, 1901

© SophiaOmni, 2005. The specific electronic form of this text is copyright. Permission is granted to print out copies for educational purposes and for personal use only. No permission is granted for commercial use.