

Personal Identity & Immortality

I. Introduction

1. The concept of personal identity is one we use so frequently and so effortlessly that we are almost never aware that we are using it.
 - Though it is customary to call the concept we're concerned with "personal identity" it might be better called "personal continuity".
2. When we focus on it and try to make it explicit, it proves to be very (very!) difficult.
3. Indeed, it is so difficult that some have concluded we don't really have a coherent concept.
 - (a) But if the concept of personal identity (or personal continuity) is incoherent, then so too is a great deal of our thought about ourselves, our past and our future.

II. Bringing the concept of personal identity into focus

1. Anticipation & dread
 - (a) We have a very special concern about our future pleasures and future pains.
 - i. You look forward to going to the party and dread going to the dentist.
 - ii. You feel differently if it is your friend going to the party/ dentist, even if you are happy/sad for them.
 - (b) What you anticipate (or dread) is not simply that someone will be doing something pleasant or suffering pain, but that YOU will.
2. Pride, guilt, & remorse
 - (a) We have a very special concern about our own past actions
 - i. Helping someone in need / throwing the winning touchdown
 - ii. Offending Granny / Cheating on your significant other
 - (b) What you are proud of or regret is not simply that someone in the past did something admirable or bad, but that YOU did.
3. The two central questions in thinking about personal identity or personal continuity:

- (a) What relation must obtain between YOU NOW and some person in the past or future, if that past or future person is YOU?
 - (b) Can that relation obtain between YOU NOW and some person or being who will exist after you die?
4. Beware of imposters!
- (a) Similarity – even perfect similarity – is not enough to make a past or future (or distant) person YOU.
 - “Identical” twins
 - The body xerox machine (which one’s pain do you really dread?)

III. Soul Theory

1. The soul (sometimes known as the ‘spirit’)
 - (a) The non-physical, non-material aspect of a person
 - (b) The ‘seat’ of consciousness
 - i. The soul is conscious — it is the thing that has conscious experiences.
 - ii. But it is not detectable by consciousness.
 - iii. The soul sees & smells, but cannot be seen or smelt.
2. How soul theory answers our two fundamental questions:

Question #1: What relation must obtain between YOU NOW and some person in the past or future, if that past or future person is YOU?
Answer: They must both have the same soul.

Question #2: Can that relation obtain between YOU NOW and some person or being who will exist after you die?
Answer: Yes, so long as that being has the same soul as YOU NOW.
3. Problems with the Soul Theory
 - (a) We can never have any evidence that our friends and family are the same people from one day to the next
 - i. because to be the same person, they must be linked to the same soul.
 - ii. but the soul is immaterial, so we have no way of detecting it.
 - iii. The defender of the Soul Theory might claim that if we see the same body at two different times, it is linked to the same soul.

- But there is no way to know whether this is true.
 - iv. The appeal to psychology: The defender of the Soul Theory might insist that we do have evidence that our friends are the same person from one encounter to the next, since they have much the same psychological traits, like personality, memories and character traits, and the soul is the seat of these psychological traits.
 - A. But even if Same Soul \rightarrow Same Psychology it does not follow that Same Psychology \rightarrow Same Soul since two different souls could have very similar psychologies (remember that identity \neq similarity).
 - v. So if we are ever justified in thinking that we know that a person we encounter today is the same person as someone we encountered in the past, then Soul Theory must be mistaken, since it entails that we are never justified in thinking this.
- (b) Much the same problem arises about your own identity over time.
- i. You think that you are the same person who took the midterm exam on Feb. 23.
 - ii. If Soul Theory is correct, this amounts to thinking that that that person had the same soul as you now.
 - iii. But you no way of checking that that person's soul and your soul now are the same.
 - iv. So if you are ever justified in thinking that you (right now) are the same person who remembers doing something a few days ago, then Soul Theory must be mistaken, since it entails that you are never justified in thinking this.

IV. Locke's Memory Theory

1. Some examples that have motivated the Memory Theory
 - (a) Knowing who you are without any information about your body
 - When you wake up, before you open your eyes, you know who you are.
 - (b) Knowing who you are despite substantial changes in your body
 - i. Rip van Winkle: ages 70 years and looks completely different, but still knows who he is when he wakes up.
 - ii. Real cases: "Awakenings"
 - Victims of a post WW-I sleeping sickness epidemic awoken by L- Dopa in 1969.

- (c) Science fiction cases: Body swapping
 - i. Locke: The prince the pauper
 - ii. A modern update: Waking up in a classmate's body
- 2. What these cases suggest:
 - (a) Body continuity is not essential for personal identity (or personal continuity).
 - (b) Continuity of memory (and other psychological traits) is important for personal identity (or personal continuity).
- 3. The soul theory agrees that continuity of memory and other psychological traits is important, because it counts as evidence for the presence of the same soul.
 - (a) Locke's Memory Theory eliminates the appeal to the mysterious intermediary of the soul.
 - (b) It claims that memory continuity is all that is required for personal identity (or personal continuity).
- 4. Making the theory explicit
 - (a) The idea of a "person-stage"
 - A relatively brief stretch of conscious awareness like the one you are experiencing now.
 - (b) A person is a whole composed of sequence of person-stages that are related in the right way.
 - (c) "The relation between two person-stages or stretches of consciousness that makes them stages of a single person is just that the latter one contains memories of the earlier one." (Perry's description of Locke's theory)
- 5. Applying the theory
 - (a) The waking up case: when you wake up, you are the same person who went to bed because you remember going to bed.
 - (b) People who woke up from sleeping sickness are the same people who went under because they remember their previous lives.
- 6. Problems with the theory
 - (a) Gaps in memory

- i. We believe that we did many, many things that we can't remember.
- ii. Do you remember eating lunch on Sept, 17, 2003?
- iii. But the theory implies that if you don't remember doing it, then the person who did it was not you.
- iv. A proposed solution: All that is really required for personal identity is a connected chain of temporally "local" memory.

(b) Bishop Butler's Problem:

- i. apparent memories vs. real memories
 - A. post-hypnotic suggestion
 - B. the Loftus experiments
 - C. the delusional historian
- ii. From "within" apparent memories can be indistinguishable from real memories.
- iii. But people are (usually) not identical with the person who actually did the things recorded in their apparent memories.
- iv. So if the Memory Theory is to be plausible, it must invoke REAL memories, and exclude memories that are merely APPARENT and not REAL.
- v. But what makes a memory REAL is that the person who actually did the deed is the SAME PERSON as the one who seems to remember doing it.
- vi. So it seems that we need the concept of SAME PERSON to explain the difference between REAL MEMORIES and APPARENT MEMORIES.
- vii. Thus the Memory Theory is circular. In order to explain the concept of SAME PERSON it must use the concept of SAME PERSON.
- viii. An attempt to avoid the circle: Real memories are memories that are CAUSED by the events that are remembered.
- ix. A problem with this attempt to avoid the circle: DUPLICATE MEMORIES.
- x. God (or a suitably advanced technology) could copy your memory and transplant it into TWO persons (or beings).
- xi. Example: The body duplicating machine produces TWO copies and destroys the original.
- xii. On the version of the Memory Theory we are considering (seeming to remember + causation = REAL memory) both copies would be YOU.

- xiii. But this is incoherent, since after a few seconds, the copies are not identical to each other.
- xiv. The Memory Theory's last gasp: If there is only ONE being who has your memories at some point in the future, he or she is YOU. If there are more than one, neither of them is YOU.
- xv. This leads to the apparently absurd conclusion that we can make your future self go out of existence by copying it!

V. Personal Identity and the Brain

1. Would brain continuity be sufficient for survival?
 - (a) The (fictional) case of Julia North
 - (b) Brain continuity preserves memory, personality & values
 - (c) It is also compatible with the fact that we can know who we are without examining our bodies.
 - (d) Because of these facts, many people think that brain continuity would be sufficient for survival.
2. Is brain continuity also necessary for survival?
 - (a) Beware: If the answer is YES, then survival after death is impossible.
3. Brain duplication:
 - (a) Perhaps brain continuity is not necessary for survival because brain duplication is sufficient.
 - (b) Some arguments suggesting that brain duplication would not preserve personal identity & thus would not be sufficient for survival.
 - i. Multiple duplicates: If several duplicates of your brain are made and placed in bodies, then all of these people will be YOU, but they will not be identical with each other, which seems absurd.
 - ii. Duplication while you are still alive: If a duplicate brain is made while you are still alive, and placed in another body, you would not anticipate that person's pleasures and pains. So he or she would not be YOU.
4. The Gradual Duplication Argument: An argument that if brain duplication is NOT sufficient for personal identity, then brain continuity isn't either.
 - (a) The bad news: You have Weisberg's disease – a brain disease which, if left untreated, will cause a horrible death.

- (b) The good news:
 - Your disease has been detected early
 - Only a few cells in your brain are affected
 - There is a new, minimally invasive technology for removing the diseased brain cells and replacing them with healthy ones
 - The replacement cells are exact copies of the cells being replaced — as they were before the onset of your illness.
- (c) More bad news: After the procedure, which was a complete success, it is discovered that a few more cells in your brain are affected by Weisberg's disease.
- (d) More good news: The same as before — the cells can be replaced with perfect copies of the cells prior to the onset of your illness.
- (e) The cycle of bad news and good news continues.
- (f) Ultimately ALL of your old brain has been replaced by new brain cells.
- (g) But at the end of this process, your brain is exactly the same as it would have been if it had simply been replaced by a duplicate brain at the beginning of the process.
 - Indeed, to make the point vivid we can imagine that all the transplanted pieces were taken from a duplicate brain made in advance.
- (h) If the person with the duplicate brain is not you, then the person who emerges from the gradual transplant process is not you either.
- (i) But the gradual transplant process seems to be an example of brain continuity (which must allow small changes over time).
- (j) So if brain duplication is not sufficient for personal identity, then brain continuity isn't sufficient either!

5. What IS required for personal identity? What IS sufficient?

- (a) It looks like none of the theories that we have considered gives a satisfying answer.
- (b) And if we don't have an answer, then when we hope for survival after death, we really don't know what we are hoping FOR!