

General Philosophy

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Lecture 8: Personal Identity



Personal Identity

- Distinguish two questions:
 - What is it to be a person?
 - This invites a discussion of mind and body etc.
 - What is it for *a* and *b* to be *the same person*?
 - This raises the issue of *personal identity*
- Another important distinction:
 - Sameness = qualitative similarity
 - Sameness = numerical identity
 - Often best to avoid the words “same” and “identity”. Instead say “similar” or “one and the same”.

Leibniz's Law Again

- If a and b are the same thing, then any property of a must also be a property of b :

$$Fa, a=b \models Fb$$

- Let $a =$ Peter Millican as a baby.
 $b =$ Peter Millican today.
 $F =$ “weighs less than a stone”.
 - We have $Fa, \neg Fb$, hence apparently $\neg(a=b)$?!
 - This can be dealt with by specifying F more precisely: “weighs less than a stone *in 1958*” or “weighs less than a stone *in 2009*”.

Cross-Temporal Identity

- We thus avoid the fallacy – most famously made in Hume’s *Treatise* – of supposing that strict *identity* (“one and the sameness”) over time implies exact *similarity* over time.
- But this still leaves the question of *what constitutes personal identity over time*: is it physical constitution, or immaterial substance, or organic life, or psychological continuity?
- This is not the same as asking *how we judge personal identity in practice* (e.g. by the body).

Locke on the Identity of Matter

- The appropriate *criterion of identity* over time depends on the kind of thing it is:
 - A single particle of matter retains its identity as long as it continues in existence. So *a* and *b* are *the same* particle of matter if there is a continuous history connecting them.
 - The identity of a body of matter depends on the identity of the particles that constitute it. It's the same body *iff* it's the same collection of particles, even if differently arranged. (However this too seems to require a *continuous history*.)

Sorites Arguments

- A sorites argument is one that depends on *iteration* of a small variation, for example:

A man with just 1 hair is bald.

If a man with just n hairs is bald, then a man with just $n+1$ hairs is bald too.

∴ A man with 1,000,000 (etc.) hairs is bald.

- If we try to relax Locke's strict criterion of bodily identity, we run into this problem:
 - Remove 1 atom from a body, and it's still the same body ...

Locke on the Identity of Organisms

- A plant or animal is not a mere collection of matter, but “*an Organization of Parts in one coherent Body, partaking of one Common Life*” (*Essay II xxvii 4*).
- Hence the identity of an organism over time is constituted by a continuous history of such an organised life.
- Likewise the identity of a man or woman: a human is a living organism.

Locke on Personal Identity

- A person is “a thinking intelligent Being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider it self ... the same thinking thing in different times ... which it does only by that consciousness, which is inseparable from thinking ... and ... essential to it” (9).
- Hence personal identity over time is a matter of *continuity of consciousness* (which depends on memory).

Personal Identity as “Forensic”

- Personal identity concerns morality, desert, reward and punishment etc. Hence Locke wants to avoid any dependence on identity of immaterial substance (which may be turned over like bodily substance, for all we know).
- Williams’ thought experiment:
 - Suppose your brain is to be switched with mine, after which various things will befall “us”. Which future person are you more concerned about, my-body-your-brain, or your-body-my-brain?

Reid's Problem Case

- Suppose that a young lieutenant can remember what he did as a child, and the later general can remember what the lieutenant did but not what the child did.
- It seems that according to Locke we have:

$$L = C$$

$$G = L$$

$$G \neq C$$

But identity is *transitive*, so this is inconsistent.

The Ancestral Relation

- x is an ancestor of y if either:
 - x is a parent of y ;
 - x is a parent of an ancestor of y .
- We can generalise this: “ancestor” is the “ancestral” relation of “parent”.
- Reid’s problem can be avoided if personal identity is based not on direct memory, but on its ancestral relation, “memory chains”.
- However lots of other problems remain ...

Memory and Quasi-Memory

- One problem with basing personal identity on memory is that something only *counts as a genuine memory* if it concerns one's own experiences. Suppose I wake up apparently remembering your experiences: would this count as a memory? If not ...
 - the criterion is circular: I have to know that it was really me to know that it's a real memory;
 - instead, we can talk of “quasi-memory”, that is, *apparent* memory.

Sleep, Coma, Forgetfulness

- Another problem is that our memory and consciousness do not seem to be continuous. We sleep, forget, and can even lapse into coma before recovering.
- All this suggests that some element of bodily (or at least brain) continuity is desirable, to “bridge over” the gaps in conscious awareness or memory. But might bodily continuity be sufficient?

Human Animals

- Since we are animals, it is tempting to identify personal identity with the identity of the human organism.
- However this has significant implications:
 - If I was once a fetus (the same human organism as me), then it seems to follow that I was once not a person (which seems to require some significant mental life).
 - So being a person is an *accidental* property of mine, rather than an *essential* property.

Relying on the Brain

- An amalgam of the two views is to identify the person with the developed functioning *brain* rather than the whole organism.
- This removes the problem of seeing a tiny embryo as a person.
- It also makes sense of the Williams case: if our brains are swapped between our bodies, then I'm personally concerned about the future of my-brain-your-body.

Split Brains

- But things are not so simple. If the nerves between the cerebral hemispheres are surgically cut (a procedure called *commissurotomy*), then a single brain can give rise to two conflicting behaviours – for example, two hands doing different things!
- Now suppose that a single brain were split and put into two bodies: we could have two new persons, both having brain *and* memory continuity with the original person.

What We Should Care About

- Maybe if this happened, we'd give up the notion of strict personal identity. Maybe, as Parfit suggests, we should instead treat it as a matter of degree.
- If what matters is our concern about our future self (or selves), then this seems to reflect the way we would judge about a split brain case: we care about the future of *both* future individuals.

“Open Texture”

- Friedrich Waismann coined this term for concepts which become vague in radically novel situations: straightforward application depends on things being generally normal.
- For example, can a man “marry” a sex-changed woman (or a sex-changed man)?
- This suggests there may be *no right answer* to some puzzle cases: if they occurred, conceptual innovation would be required.