

Personal Identity



Existing through Time

Two Kinds of Concerns

- ❖ Metaphysical
- ❖ Forensic

Metaphysical Concerns

- ❖ Let us accept as a datum that we change through time, while remaining numerically one and the same.
 - ❖ Under what circumstances is this so?
 - ❖ I cease to exist if my atoms are schmeared from here to Alpha Centauri.
 - ❖ A glass of Bordeaux ceases to exist when spilled into the Pacific Ocean.
 - ❖ Yet in both cases (let us stipulate) all the same atoms exist before the change in location.
 - ❖ So, it is natural to think that I exist through time (a glass of Bordeaux exists through time) only if some conditions or other obtain.
 - ❖ Which are those?

Forensic Concerns

- ❖ End-of-life issues
- ❖ Persistent vegetative states
- ❖ Beginning-of-life issues
- ❖ Cases (or alleged cases) of multiple personalities
- ❖ Generally speaking, ascriptions of responsibility—of praise or blame—require, or seem to require, sameness of person.

A Natural Thought

- ❖ S^2 at t^2 is the same person as S^1 at t^1 iff S^2 and S^1 are (or have) *the same body*.
- ❖ Let us call this the Bodily Continuity (BC) theory of personal identity.

A Religious Thought

- ❖ S^2 at t^2 is the same person as S^1 at t^1 iff S^2 and S^1 are (or have) *the same soul*.
- ❖ Let us call this the Sameness of Soul (SS) theory of personal identity.

The Prince and the Cobbler

- ❖ For should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, every one sees he would be the same person with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions: but who would say it was the same man? The body too goes to the making the man, and would, I guess, to everybody determine the man in this case, wherein the soul, with all its princely thoughts about it, would not make another man: but he would be the same cobbler to every one besides himself. I know that, in the ordinary way of speaking, the same person, and the same man, stand for one and the same thing. And indeed every one will always have a liberty to speak as he pleases, and to apply what articulate sounds to what ideas he thinks fit, and change them as often as he pleases. But yet, when we will inquire what makes the same spirit, man, or person, we must fix the ideas of spirit, man, or person in our minds; and having resolved with ourselves what we mean by them, it will not be hard to determine, in either of them, or the like, when it is the same, and when not. —Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* II 27. 15

Against BC

1. If BC, then sameness of body is both necessary and sufficient for PI.
2. If sameness of body is sufficient for PI, then the body of the cobbler when informed by the consciousness of the prince would be the cobbler and not the prince (or, be the body of the cobbler and not the body of the prince).
3. It is not the case that when informed by the consciousness of the prince, the body of the cobbler is the cobbler (or, is the body of the cobbler and not the body of the prince).
4. So, sameness of body is not sufficient for PI.
5. If sameness of body is necessary for PI, then the prince and cobbler could not swap bodies.
6. The prince and cobbler can swap bodies.
7. So, sameness of body is not necessary for PI.
8. So, not BC.

A Positive Proposal

- ❖ The story of the prince and the cobbler not only tells against BC/SS, but suggests a better theory, the psychological continuity (PC) theory of PI:
- ❖ S^2 at t^2 is the same person as S^1 at t^1 iff S^2 and S^1 are psychologically continuous and connected.
- ❖ For instance, S^2 at t^2 is the same person as S^1 at t^1 iff S^2 remembers the experiences of S^1 .

Some Advantages of PC

- ❖ Captures various features of our self-conception:
 - ❖ We are thinkers/perceivers/feelers.
 - ❖ We are agents.
 - ❖ So we—rightly—hold ourselves as praiseworthy/blameworthy.
 - ❖ We remember ourselves, so to speak, from the inside.
 - ❖ We are, in sum, *essentially* psychological beings.
 - ❖ We tend to regard the self, as a psychological being, as a locus of value.

Problems for PC

- ❖ Two sorts of problems arise:
 - ❖ The boy, the corporal, the general (Reid)
 - ❖ The possibility of fission

The Boy, the Corporal, the General

- ❖ Suppose a boy grows into a corporal, performs a valiant deed at that time, and then grows older, becoming a general in later life. Suppose further that the corporal vividly recalls having been flogged at school, whereas the general, later in life, has forgotten all about the boyhood incident. Still, the general proudly remembers the courageous deed performed by the corporal.
- ❖ This poses a problem for PC.

The Problem

1. If PC, then the corporal and the boy are the same person.
2. If PC, then the general and the corporal are the same person.
3. It follows by the transitivity of identity, then, that the general and the boy are the same person.
4. Yet if PC, the general is not the same person as the boy.
5. So, if PC, the general both is and is not the same person as the boy.
6. This is an obvious contradiction.
7. So, not PC.

The Possibility of Fission

- ❖ Suppose that one day we live in a medically and technologically advanced society in which it is possible to enter a brain-state duplicating machine. In such a machine, a brain would be scanned and all its data encoded, such that it could be imprinted onto a blank brain, with the result that the new brain had all the same psychological features of the old. One day, the king enters the machine. Alas through an oversight, the technician imprints two blank brains. As a result we will have two brains, both of which exhibit states tying them, psychologically speaking, to the pre-scanned brain. Afterwards, each brain is lodged into a newly fabricated body. Then, a problem for PC. . .

The Post-fission Situation

- ❖ Unsurprisingly, each claims to be the person whose brain was earlier scanned.
- ❖ Each says, e.g., 'I am the king.'
- ❖ Let us suppose the brain scan occurs at t^2 .
Thereafter, then, at t^3 we have two claimants to the throne, K^2 and K^3 , each of whom claims to be the king K^1 who existed at t^1 before the fission.

The Problem

1. If PC, then K^2 is identical with K^1 .
2. If PC, then K^3 is identical with K^1 .
3. So, if PC, then, by the transitivity of identity, K^2 and K^3 are identical.
4. Yet if PC, K^2 and K^3 are not identical.
5. So, if PC, K^2 and K^3 both are and are not identical.
6. This is an obvious contradiction.
7. So, not PC.