

Personal Identity



Existing through Time

Epicharmus: the Growing Argument

- ❖ The Scene: Alpha approaches Beta asking to be repaid a debt.
 - ❖ Beta: ‘If you had an odd number of pebbles—or for that matter an even one—and then chose to add or subtract a pebble, do you think you would have the same number?’
 - ❖ Alpha: ‘No.’
 - ❖ Beta: ‘If you had a measure of one cubit and chose to add or cut off some length of it, that measure would no longer exist, would it?’
 - ❖ ‘No.’
 - ❖ Beta: ‘Well now, think of a human in the same way: one human is growing and another is diminishing. All are constantly in the process of change. But what by its nature changes and never stays put must already be different from what it changed from. You and I are different from who we were yesterday, and by the same argument will be different again tomorrow.’

The Moral?

- ❖ The first moral, drawn by Beta, is then clear: Beta is not the same man as the debtor. Sadly, that debtor seems to have perished, leaving Alpha no way to collect what is owed him.
- ❖ In his exasperation, Alpha strikes Beta. Beta protests.
- ❖ Alpha is now at liberty to draw a second moral and to feed Beta some of his own medicine. 'Why are you angry with me? As someone nearby just demonstrated, 'twas not I who hit you, but someone else altogether.'

The Growing Argument

- ❖ The Growing Argument (GA) is really a family of arguments, involving different ways of fleshing out the following simple schema:
 - (1) If we add (or subtract) one pebble from a pile of pebbles, the resulting pile of pebbles is not identical to the original pile.
 - (2) A human being is like a pile of pebbles.
 - (3) So, when a human being gains (or loses) a single particle, the resulting human being is not identical to the original.

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.

Perhaps the soul?

- ❖ SS: 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*.
 - ❖ This may be given a religious understanding.
 - ❖ Perhaps a soul is the divine component of human beings.
 - ❖ At death, the soul and body separate. The body remains; so, the soul is not the body.
 - ❖ Or it may be given a secular understanding.
 - ❖ Perhaps a soul just is the continuing psychological subject; perhaps a soul is just, well, a person.
 - ❖ At death, the soul/person ends; but the body remains; so, the soul/person is not the body.

If so, then. . .

1. If SS, then sameness of soul is both necessary and sufficient for PI.
2. If the soul is sufficient for PI, then it is not possible for two souls to swap consciousness.
3. It is possible for two souls to swap consciousness.
4. So, sameness of soul is not sufficient for PI.
5. If sameness of soul is necessary for PI, then the prince and cobbler could not swap souls.
6. The prince and cobbler can swap souls.
7. So, sameness of soul is not necessary for PI.
8. So, not SS.

If not, then. . .

- ❖ . . .there is some special reason why consciousness is inseparable from the soul?
- ❖ Why might that be?
 - ❖ (This question is posed not as unanswerable, but as not readily or easily answered.)
- ❖ Pending a compelling answer, though: not SS.

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.