1 What is a theory of personal identity?

Suppose that you have a person, \( A \), who exists at some time, and a person, \( B \), who exists at some later time. A theory of personal identity is a theory which tries to answer the question: what does it take for \( A \) and \( B \) to be the same person?

Note that this is not a theory which described how we usually recognize and identify people. For example, I usually recognize you by some combination of your appearance and where in the room you sit. But of course two of you could, in an elaborate prank, change seats and have extensive reconstructive surgery which made each of you look much like the other. But this would not mean that either of you became the other person.

It is surprisingly difficult to come up with a theory of personal identity which is not open to obvious objections. For example, you might be at first inclined to suggest that \( A \) and \( B \) are the same person if and only if they have the same body. But now consider ‘body swapping’ examples of the sort you might see in movies. Many people think that this sort of thing at least makes sense, and so is in one sense possible; but if it is, doesn’t that mean that \( A \) and \( B \) might be the same person even if they do not share a body?

Furthermore, what does it even mean to have the same body? You’re constantly gaining and losing cells, so that your body now has hardly anything in common with your body 10 years ago. But does this mean that you really are not the same person now as you were then? Surely not.

A second initial thought is that \( A \) and \( B \) are the same person if they have the same personality, or the same consciousness, or the same memory. But, again, there are problems
here. You don’t have the same memories, or exactly the same personality, as you had a
year ago; but that doesn’t mean that you are not the same person. Suppose that you
met someone who, by some strange chance, had personalities and memories more similar
to yours now than yours now are to the you of 5 years ago. Would you think that that
person was identical to you, or as much the same person as you as the you of 5 years ago?

2 Parfit’s example of teletransportation

Here’s a potential solution to the problems with the ‘personality’ theory: maybe we should
focus on examples of persons at consecutive times, or near enough. Maybe for such pairs
of persons at times we can say that if they’re similar enough psychologically, and if the
psychological states of the later one are caused by the psychological states of the earlier
one, they are the same person. Then we could say, in the above case, that $A$ and $B$ are
the same person if there is some chain leading from the former to the latter made up of
‘consecutive persons’ of this sort.

This seems to have the virtue that it makes sense of the possibility of cases of teletransportation,
of the sort that Derek Parfit described in his book, *Reasons and Persons*. Reading about this sort of example, it seems very plausible that the person who emerges from the teletransporter is the same as the person who entered. And this fits well with the sort of ‘personality’ theory sketched above:

the person who emerges from the teletransporter is psychologically very similar to the
person who enters, and the psychological states of the person who emerges do seem to be
carved by the psychological states of the person who entered.

However, as Parfit noticed, these cases are not as unproblematic for the psychological
theory as they seem.
In this version of the case, the psychological theory seems to lead to the conclusion that the person who enters the teleportation machine is identical to both the person who is on Mars, and the person who is still on earth. But that can’t be right, since the person on Mars and the person on earth are clearly different people.

Assuming the above psychological theory, we can state the resultant paradox like this:

1. If \( A \) and \( B \) are separated by a very small amount of time, are very similar psychologically, and are such that the psychological states of \( B \) causally depend on the psychological states of \( A \), then \( A = B \).
2. The person who enters the teleporter = the person who is on Mars after the New Scanner runs. (1)
3. The person who enters the teleporter = the person who leaves the teleporter on Earth after the New Scanner runs.
4. If \( x = y \) and \( y = z \), then \( x = z \). (Transitivity of identity)

C. The person who is on Mars after the New Scanner runs = the person who leaves the teleporter on Earth after the New Scanner runs.

The problem is that the conclusion seems clearly false. Does this show that premise (1), which states the ‘personality’ theory, is also false?

3 Cell replacement

This might incline you to adopt some version of the ‘body’ theory of personal identity. But this view too has problems. Suppose that someone gets an organ transplant. Clearly, this will not result in the cessation of their existence, even though part of their body was replaced. But what if half the organs in their body are replaced? Would they still continue to be the same person? Can you see a way to recreate the problem we saw with the transitivity of identity for this view?

Should the proponent of the ‘body’ theory link identity to the whole body, the brain, or what? If the brain (or part of it), does this mean that brain replacement surgery is, in principle, impossible to survive, and always results in the creation of a new person?
A different version of the problem: the proponent of the ‘body’ theory will surely admit that you could have 1% of the cells in your body replaced, and must deny that you could have 99% of the cells in your body replaced. So, somewhere there must be a dividing line, such that changing that many or more of your cells would result in your ceasing to exist. But is this really plausible? Could it really be the case that if 46.7% of the cells in your body are replaced you remain the same person, but that replacing 46.8% of your cells results in your death, and the creation of a new conscious being?

4 Split brain patients

The examples of teletransportation and cell replacement pose problems for particular theories of personal identity. Parfit thinks that the examples of split brain patients — which are real, not imagined — should cause us to question our views about the sorts of things that people are.

An explanation of the split brain data, and the evidence that there is more than one stream of consciousness.

These cases give rise to the following paradox:

1. In split brain cases, the patient will give reports of two different psychological episodes — say, seeing blue and seeing red — which must have occurred at the same time.
2. The split brain patient will say that they are aware of only one of these conscious episodes.
3. There are two separate streams of consciousness belonging to the patient. (1,2)
4. One person cannot have two separate streams of consciousness; for each stream of consciousness, there must be a separate person.
5. The split brain patient, while their corpus callosum is severed, is more than one person. (3,4)
6. If you repaired the patient’s corpus callosum, you would not be destroying a person; in severing the patient’s corpus callosum, you would not be creating a person.
7. The split brain patient, before having their corpus callosum severed and after having it repaired (if this were possible) is more than one person. (5,6)
8. You are are I are in every relevant respect just like the split brain patient, before having their corpus callosum severed and/or after having it repaired (if this were possible).

C. You and I are more than one person. (7,8)

There’s a sense in which this conclusion does not make sense. You can understand the intended conclusion as the claim that our concept of a person is somehow inherently unstable, and leads us to contradiction when we consider cases such as split brain patients.
Parfit thinks that the appropriate response to these problems is to adopt the *bundle theory*, which you can think of as a version of the four-dimensionalist theory that we discussed in connection with the problem of the statue and the clay. In explaining the Bundle Theory, Parfit compares persons to clubs; and say that the identity of persons over time is analogous to the identity of clubs over time. If this is true, what’s the analogue of the members and rules of the club in the case of persons?

Consider the version of the teletransportation case in which you emerge on earth, and see ‘yourself’ also emerging from the machine on Mars. Now suppose you find out that the machine has caused irreversible problems with your nervous system which will cause you to die in 10 minutes. Should the existence of your clone on Mars make you feel better about the situation? What should the bundle theorist say? Is there a big difference between the case in which the person on earth vs. the one in which the person on Mars survives?

Suppose you are a dualist, which means that you think that persons are immaterial things distinct from their bodies. How should you respond to the above problems?

What if you think that persons are material beings, but you do not want to be a bundle theorist? What should you say about, for example, the cell replacement example?