

The self, part I: immaterial souls

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1 The self and immortality

The ‘First Night’ of Perry’s dialogue focuses on the question of the possibility (conceivability) of life after death — i.e., of the immortality of the soul. One question you should ask is: what is the relationship between questions about immortality and questions about the nature of the self?

Suppose that we have a theory of the nature of the self which says that I am some thing x . We could fill in ‘ x ’ with ‘my body’, ‘my brain’, or something else entirely. A theory of the nature of the self is compatible with the possibility of immortality if and only if x is the sort of thing that could continue to exist after death.

The point is put well on pp. 3-4:

“Survival means surviving, no more, no less. I have no doubts that I shall merge with being; plants will take root in my remains, and the chemicals that I am will continue to make their contribution to life. I am enough of an ecologist to be comforted. But survival . . . must offer comforts of a different sort, the comforts of *anticipation*. Survival means that tomorrow, or sometime

in the future, there will be someone who will experience, who will see and touch and smell — or at the very least, think and reason and remember. And this person will be *me*. This person will be related to me in such a way that it is correct for me to anticipate, to look forward to, those future experiences. And I am related to her in such a way that it will be right for her to remember what I have thought and done . . . And the only relation that supports anticipation and memory in this way, is simply *identity*. For it is never correct to anticipate, as happening to oneself, what will happen to someone else, is it?”

This gives us more information about what we should expect from a theory of the self which would be compatible with the immortality of the person. It should be a theory which makes sense of the anticipation of events happening after my death.

2 The self as an immaterial soul

The wish to make sense of the possibility of life after death might push one in the direction of the idea that the self is not a physical thing like one’s body, but something immaterial. The example of the Kleenex box (pp. 5-6).

The idea that the self is an immaterial soul is expressed in the following series of claims from Miller:

“If you were merely a live human body — as the Kleenex box is merely cardboard and glue in a certain arrangement — then the death of your body would be the end of you. But surely you are more than that, fundamentally more than that. What is fundamentally you is not your body, but your soul or self or mind. . . . I mean the nonphysical and nonmaterial aspects of you, your consciousness. . . . Your mind or soul is immaterial, lodged in your body while you are on earth. The two are intimately related but not identical. Now clearly, what concerns us in survival is your mind or soul.” (6-7)

2.1 *An epistemological objection to the view of the self as immaterial soul*

Following the introduction of the idea of an immaterial soul, Weirob presents a challenge to this view of the self:

“So I am not really this body, but a soul or mind or spirit? And this soul cannot be seen or felt or touched or smelt? That is implied, I take it, by the fact that it is immaterial? . . . [But] If you cannot see or touch or in any way perceive my soul, what makes you think that the one you are confronted with now *is* the very same soul that you were confronted with [before]? . . . all you can see is my body. You can see, perhaps, that the same body is before you . . . But you have just said that [I am] not a body but a soul. In judging that the same person is before you now as was before you then, you must be making a judgment about souls — which, you said, cannot be seen or touched or smelt or tasted. And so, I repeat, how do you know?” (7-8)

One way to press this challenge is to point out the possibility that different immaterial souls could, at different times, be matched up with different bodies. This is the way that Locke puts the point in II.xxvii.27 of the *Essay on Human Understanding*:

“But taking, as we ordinarily now do, (in the dark concerning these matters) the Soul of a Man, for an immaterial Substance, independent from Matter, and indifferent alike to it all, there can from the Nature of things, be no Absurdity at all, to suppose, that the same Soul may, at different times be united to different Bodies . . .”

One way of turning this possibility into an argument against the identification of the self with an immaterial soul goes like this: we typically are able to re-identify persons. But if persons were immaterial souls which we could not perceive, this would be impossible. So persons are not immaterial souls.

This can be thought of as a challenge to the view that the self is an immaterial soul: we should be able to give some account of how we can know things about these immaterial souls. The rest of the ‘First Night’ consists of Miller’s attempts to respond to this challenge, and Weirob’s objections to his responses.

2.1.1 Response 1: We know a priori that souls are, as a matter of necessity, matched up 1-to-1 with bodies

Why this is a non-starter for attempts to explain the possibility of immortality.

The result of the failure of this attempt seems to be that our knowledge of the relations between souls and bodies (if we have such knowledge) must be knowledge we have gained from some sort of experience.

2.1.2 Response 2: We know from observed correlations of souls with bodies that the same souls typically are matched up with the same bodies

It is natural then to think that we know about the correlation between souls and bodies in the same way that we know about other such general correlations: by having observed instances of the correlation in the past. The example of the chocolates (10-11).

The problem with the application of this model to the case of knowledge of the correlation between immaterial souls and bodies:

“To establish such a correlation in the first place, surely one must have some *other* means of judging sameness of soul. You do not have such a means . . . Since you can never, so to speak, bite into my soul, can never see it or touch it, you have no way of testing your hypothesis that sameness of body means sameness of self.

If, as you claim, identity of persons consisted in identity of immaterial unobservable souls, then judgements of personal identity of the sort we make

every day whenever we greet a friend ...are really judgements about such souls. ...But if such judgements were really about souls, they would all be groundless and without foundation. ...we have no direct method of observing sameness of soul, and so ...we can have no indirect method either.” (10-12)

A similarity to Hume’s response to Paley.

2.1.3 Response 3: We know from observed correlations of psychological characteristics with bodies that the same souls typically are matched up with the same bodies

At this point, Miller gives an intuitively compelling response to the problem:

“...there is a way to test the hypothesis of a correlation after all. When I entered the room, I expected you to react just as you did — argumentatively and skeptically. Had the person with this body reacted completely differently perhaps I would have been forced to conclude that it was not you. Similarity of psychological characteristics — a person’s attitudes, beliefs, memories, prejudices, and the like — is observable. These are correlated with identity of body on the one side, and of course with sameness of soul on the other. So the correlation between body and soul can be established after all by this intermediate link.” (12)

To this idea, we get the following objection:

“For all you know, the immaterial soul which you think is lodged in my body might change from day to day, from hour to hour, from minute to minute, replaced each time by another soul psychologically similar. You cannot see or touch it, so how would you know?” (14)

This is an attempt to show that knowledge of personality traits cannot give us evidence about identities of souls.

Why this is a weak objection. An analogous objection about sameness of material objects over time.

A better objection: pose the same dilemma as above about whether psychological characteristics are correlated necessarily or contingently with souls. If necessarily, then souls seem dispensable. If contingently, then we need some justification for the supposed correlation. The possibility of a middle ground.

2.1.4 Response 4: We know from knowledge of our own soul and body that the same souls typically are matched up with the same bodies

Miller’s last attempt is to say that we are justified in believing a correlation between souls and bodies to hold because we can observe that the correlation holds in our own case, and infer that it holds in the case of other people as well.

Two objections to this final attempt:

- Inferring a belief about all cases from knowledge of a single case is in general not justified.
- We cannot even know in our own case that we have had a single soul throughout our lives. (16-17)

The possibility of introspective access to a soul, as opposed to introspective access to thoughts, beliefs, etc.

2.2 A metaphysical objection to the view of the self as immaterial soul

In the text, we did not discuss any metaphysical arguments that there could not be such things as immaterial souls; we only discussed arguments to the effect that we could not know the things about such souls that we take ourselves to know about individual persons. But there are also metaphysical reasons for doubting the coherence of the idea that individuals are immaterial souls.

The problem of making sense of causal relations between an immaterial soul and a material world.