

The self, part II: personal identity as psychological continuity

Jeff Speaks

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1	Persons and person-stages	1
2	The memory theory of personal identity	2
2.1	Objection 1: the memory theory is circular	3
2.2	Objection 2: the possibility of duplicates	4
2.3	Objection 3: anticipation of future pains	4
2.4	Objection 4: memory is not transitive, whereas identity is	4

In the beginning of the ‘Second Night’ of Perry’s dialogue, we get some objections to the idea that the self just is the body. This is a view to which we will return. Most of this part of the dialogue is devoted to the idea that personal identity is a matter of some kind of psychological continuity; this is the view that we will focus on first.

1 Persons and person-stages

Suppose that you have the idea that the self has something important to do with one’s psychological states, personality, etc. This raises a problem in accounting for sameness of persons over time. After all, you are the same person that you were one year ago, but are not in exactly the same psychological states you were in then. This suggests that any account of personal identity in terms of psychological characteristics will have to have something to do with similarity over time.

This is the idea which is introduced by the comparison with the river (pp. 23-24):

“... we constantly deal with objects extended in space and time. But we are seldom aware of the objects’ wholes, but only of their parts or stretches of their histories. [When we make a statement of identity] it is usually because we are really judging that different parts fit together, in some appropriate pattern, into a certain kind of whole. ... judgements as to the identity of an object of a certain kind — rivers or baseball games or whatever — involve judgements as to the *parts* of those things being connected in a certain way ... How foolish it would be, when we ask a question about the identity of baseball games, to look for something *else*, other than the game as a whole, which had to be the same.”

The idea that a similarly foolish mistake has been made by the proponent of the idea that sameness of a person over time is a matter of sameness of immaterial soul.

The idea that just as rivers are river-stages connected by appropriate relations and baseball games are, e.g., innings connected by appropriate relations, persons are person-stages connected by appropriate relations (25):

“Identity is not, so to speak, something under the person stages, nor in something they are attached to, but something you build from them.”

Why this seems to make possible the immortality of the soul.

What the appropriate relations are in the cases of rivers and baseball games. The question of what the appropriate relations might be in the case of persons.

2 The memory theory of personal identity

The idea that the ‘appropriate relations’ are psychological ones — in particular, relations of memory:

“the relation between two person-stages or stretches of consciousness that makes them stages of a single person is just that the later one contains memories of the earlier one. . . . To remember — or,, more plausibly, to be able to remember — the thoughts and feelings of a person who was conscious in the past is just what it is to be that person.” (26)

Locke’s expression of the idea:

“This, few would find reason to doubt of, if these perceptions, with their consciousness, always remained present in the mind, whereby the same thinking thing would be always consciously present, and, as would be thought, evidently the same to itself.” (§10)

And later:

“But though the same immaterial substance or soul does not alone, wherever it be, and in whatsoever state, make the same man; yet it is plain, consciousness, as far as ever it can be extended — should it be to ages past- unites existences and actions very remote in time into the same person, as well as it does the existences and actions of the immediately preceding moment: so that whatever has the consciousness of present and past actions, is the same person to whom they both belong. Had I the same consciousness that I saw the ark and Noah’s flood, as that I saw an overflowing of the Thames last winter, or as that I write now, I could no more doubt that I who write this now, that saw the Thames

overflowed last winter, and that viewed the flood at the general deluge, was the same self, place that self in what substance you please — than that I who write this am the same myself now whilst I write (whether I consist of all the same substance, material or immaterial, or no) that I was yesterday. For as to this point of being the same self, it matters not whether this present self be made up of the same or other substances — I being as much concerned, and as justly accountable for any action that was done a thousand years since, appropriated to me now by this self-consciousness, as I am for what I did the last moment.” (§16)

Intuitions behind psychological theories of personal identity. The idea that your self is your ‘personality.’

2.1 Objection 1: the memory theory is circular

The distinction between real memory and apparent memory. Why apparent memory is not enough for identity:

“Many men who think that they are Napoleon claim to remember losing the battle of Waterloo. We may suppose them to be sincere, and to really seem to remember it. But they do not actually remember because they were not at the battle and are not Napoleon.” (27)

So we need real memories, not just apparent or seeming memories, to explain personal identity. What is the difference between real and apparent memories? The example of the hypnotist. The idea that real memories are just apparent memories + identity. Why this makes the memory theory of personal identity circular.

A reply on the part of the memory theory of personal identity: real memory is not apparent memory + identity, but rather apparent memory + some kind of appropriate causal connection:

“You point out that we have two putative rememberers [one who really remembers, and one who only apparently remembers.] You ask what marks the difference ... The experiences themselves cause the later apparent memories in the one case, while the hypnotist causes them in the other. We can say that the [real] rememberer is the one of the two whose memories were *caused in the right way* by the earlier experiences. We thus distinguish between the rememberer and the hypnotic subject, without appeal to identity.” (30-1)

How this seems to solve the problem of circularity. A way to extend this version of the memory theory to make possible life after death.

2.2 *Objection 2: the possibility of duplicates*

Suppose that we think of life after death as a case in which God creates something after your death with memories of your experiences, and does so *because* you had those experiences. So there is a causal dependence of this being's apparent memories on your experiences, and this being therefore, on the present version of the memory theory, seems to be identical to you.

The problem of duplicates:

“The problem I see is this. If God could create one person in Heaven, and by designing her after me, make her me, why could he not make two such bodies, and cause this transfer of information into both of them? Would both of these Heavenly persons then be me? ... [But] if each of these Heavenly persons is me, they must be each other. But then they are not two but one. But my assumption was that God creates two, not one. ... So either God, by creating a Heavenly person with a brain modeled after mind, does not really create someone identical with me but merely someone similar to me, or God is somehow limited to making only one such being.”

A first possible reply: the proponent of the memory theory could give up on life after death, and deny the possibility of God and the possibility of Heavenly duplicates. Why this reply does not get you very far. Cases of fission. This shows that this problem with the memory theory really has nothing to do with life after death.

A second possible reply: “if God makes one such creature, she is you, while if he makes more, none of them is you.” (33) An extension of this to cases of fission. Why this makes identity and survival extrinsic affairs; why this seems implausible. The example of death by duplication (35-36).

2.3 *Objection 3: anticipation of future pains*

Suppose that you were informed that in the future you would experience a lengthy period of extreme torture. Suppose that you were told that before that point, your memories would be erased and transferred to someone else, and that they would be replaced with false memories. Would that change your attitude toward the future period of torture? (This kind of example is inspired by Bernard Williams, “The Self and the Future”.)

2.4 *Objection 4: memory is not transitive, whereas identity is*

In 1785, Thomas Reid presented this criticism of the memory theory:

“Suppose a brave officer to have been flogged when a boy at school, for robbing an orchard, to have taken a standard from the enemy in his first campaign, and to have been made a general in advanced life: Suppose also, which must

be admitted to be possible, that when he took the standard, he was conscious of his having been flogged at school, and that when made a general he was conscious of his taking the standard, but had absolutely lost the consciousness of his flogging. These things being supposed, it follows, from Mr LOCKE'S doctrine, that he who was flogged at school is the same person who took the standard, and that he who took the standard is the same person who was made a general. Whence it follows, if there be any truth in logic, that the general is the same person with him who was flogged at school. But the general's consciousness does not reach so far back as his flogging, therefore, according to Mr LOCKE'S doctrine, he is not the person who was flogged. Therefore the general is, and at the same time is not the same person with him who was flogged at a school." ("Of Mr. Locke's Account of Our Personal Identity", in his *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*)

What kind of objection is this to the memory theory? How could a proponent of the memory theory respond?