

The self, part III: the self as the body

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So far, we have discussed two views of the nature of the self: according to the first, the self is an immaterial soul; according to the second, the self is something like a history of sets of mental phenomena (perceptions, personality traits, beliefs, etc.). We have found reasons for doubting each of these views.

This might lead you to think that the right answer is also the simplest: persons just are their bodies. This view is discussed in the ‘Third Night’ of Perry’s dialogue.

1 Bodily identity and brain transplants

In the dialogue, Weirob defends the idea that persons are identical to their bodies:

“personal identity amounts to identity of a human body, nothing more, nothing less. A person is just a live human body, or more precisely, I suppose, a human body that is alive and has certain capacities — consciousness and perhaps rationality.” (37)

How can this view cope with changes in one’s body? A return to persons and person-stages.

Two objections to identifying persons with their bodies:

1. The example of Julia North (pp. 38-40). Intuitions about personal identity in cases of brain transplants.
2. Inability to explain the importance of personal identity.

2 Brain identity

Why not reply to the problem of brain transplants by replacing the criterion of bodily identity with one based on brain identity? Two arguments against identifying persons with their brains:

1. This seems to fail to account for the source of the intuitions in the brain transplant case. What seems to be doing the work there is not continuity of brain, but continuity of psychology.
2. A thought experiment: brain replacement surgery. (See the discussion of 'brain rejuvenation' on p. 46.)

3 Mixed views

So far we have looked at what appear to be difficult objections to all three views of personal identity. This might convince you that none of them is correct. But how could this be? What could the self be, if not an immaterial soul, a body, or something to do with psychological characteristics?

Another possibility is that the correct view is some combination of these three views, or two of the three views. But it's difficult to find a plausible way to combine the views. Can you think of a combination of some two of the three views which is more plausible than any of the three taken individually?