

Stephen Lumsden, essay for Units 7-9, Program B: Philosophy Of Mind

(Essay for Question 1. Can one give adequate criteria for the identity of a person over time? Illustrate your answer with thought experiments describing 'problem cases' of personal identity.)

A Discussion of Criteria For Personal Identity Over Time

How can you decide what establishes personal identity over time? In this essay I will briefly summarise the main criteria needed to maintain personal identity over time. Personal identity is the sense of self within us that we like to think stays with us throughout our life. We shall look into the main criteria which contribute to this, namely body identity, memory identity, personality identity and soul identity. We shall then use some thought experiments to argue for and against each principle and comment on the significance of each approach before concluding what is best.

Firstly body identity dictates that once we maintain the same body our identity remains intact. Bernard Williams' thought experiment challenges us with the scenario that a mad scientist has captured you and a friend. He has transplanted your brain into your friend's body and your friend's brain into your body. He then proposes one body has to be tortured. Which one would you choose? Most people choose their own body in the knowledge that their brain (and by extension mind) resides in the skull of the their friend. From this we can conclude that most people associate identity with something in one's mind.

This implies that the idea of personal identity is closely related to our own subjective experience. John Locke thought that personal identity equated to the continuity of one's consciousness, but this identity could only be maintained if the subject in question could have all their memories intact from the earlier time they were comparing them selves to. However, if the basis of personal identity does hinge on memory, where does that leave amnesia sufferers? Or even those with bad memories as they age? Peter Carruthers gives us the example of an elderly woman who may remember her years working as a lawyer, but does not remember childhood memories. When she was a lawyer though, she could remember her child years. Therefore we could say that memory identity can contribute to personal identity over time through continued events linking the overall sense of self. Is the amnesia patient now excluded from their continued identity on such grounds then? This is unlikely as evidence has shown that such sufferers will still possess similar personality traits and desires as they had earlier in life, before their memory failed. Family members and friends will still recognise them and their behaviour as the person they were before. Therefore their sustained effort in personal identity, or life-history-in-the-making, is preserved and this aspect of the self is continuous with what went before.

In more practical matters a combination of all three of these types of identity must be appreciated in the area of criminal investigation. If the ability to remember the crime did relate to guilt and culpability, it would be too easy for the criminal to feign memory loss. Therefore we need to be able to identify the culprit physically and ensure they were of sound mind while doing the deed, i.e. their personality was intact when committing the crime. Therefore we cannot dismiss the usefulness of physical identity through time entirely. If we only have the body what really remains and matters

though? While the living state always dictates body identity (brain transplants are not presently a reality practically), our memory and personality identity only begin in early childhood. With severe cases of Alzheimers and serious head injury patients may be left in a vegetative state, which would end any such terms of memory or personality identity. If one's personal identity can be then said to stop at this stage, this would have repercussions in describing a person's rights in the debate relating to euthanasia.

If we believe in the existence of the soul, identity is still left intact even in this vegetative state as described above. Also, if we believe that the soul can survive death or can transfer to a new body through reincarnation in the future, we are left wondering what part of our future selves will remain intact if memory or personality is not preserved. We would have no relationship to the loved ones or friends in this notion of continued personal identity, with no good memories to cherish, no habits to enjoy, no ambitions to full-fill. We are left questioning if preserving identity in this way actually matters to us. Derek Parfitt views personal identity as mere identity as a set of processes which will all change given enough time. If I could live a thousand years, I may now judge myself to be shy, hard-working, compassionate to the poor and a loving husband. In three hundred years I may have become extrovert , lazy, cold and divorced. I may not even remember the person I am today, and not even care. This is not what I would like right now and so this scenario also confronts us with what really matters to us and questions how we like to see ourselves developing.

In concluding we could say that the best criteria would be a combination of body, memory and personality identities as described above. These represent our achievements, current state of mind and what we desire to preserve. In looking at what matters we are reminded of what we value in dealing with our own qualitative subjective experience and interacting with the outside world, being at home with our own past life, and looking forward to the future.

References

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