

Philosophy of Mind and Metaphysics

Lecture V: Personal Identity

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Spring 2004

I. QUESTIONS OF PERSONAL IDENTITY

- a. In virtue of what is some past or future thing *you*? Olson puts the question like this: “Under what possible circumstances is a person who exists at one time identical with something that exists at another time?” Olson calls this the *persistence question*.
- b. What sort of thing is it, metaphysically speaking, that so exists from one time to another? Olson calls this the *What am I? question*.

II. THE PSYCHOLOGICAL APPROACH

- a. This view maintains, in general, that “some psychological relation is either necessary or sufficient (or both) for one to persist. You are that future being that in some sense inherits its mental features—personality, beliefs, memories, and so on—from you. You are that past being whose mental features you have inherited.”
- b. In what psychological relation might our identity through time consist?
 - i. MEMORY: a past or future being is you if and only if you can now remember an experience she had then, or vice versa. Let’s call this the MEMORY CRITERION.
 - 1. The Memory Criterion seems to violate the transitivity of identity. For imagine that Julia remembers at t_1 something she did at t_0 , and remembers at t_2 something she did at t_1 , but that she *fails* to remember at t_2 *anything* she did at t_0 . This suggests the following: Julia at t_1 is identical to Julia at t_0 , and Julia at t_2 is identical to Julia at t_1 , but Julia at t_2 is *not* identical to Julia at t_0 . This clearly violates the transitivity of identity.
 - 2. The Memory Criterion seems to violate the idea that remembering already involves, perhaps even conceptually, the notion of personal identity and so cannot be that in virtue of which a person is identical to some past or future thing. “To remember paying a fine ... is to remember *yourself* paying. That makes it trivial and uninformative to say that you are the person whose experiences you can

remember ... You can't know whether someone genuinely remembers a past experience without already knowing whether he is the one who had it. We should have to know who was who before applying the theory that is supposed to tell us who is who."

ii. **PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTINUITY:** a person, S, who exists at t_0 is identical with N, something that exists at t_1 , if and only if S is, at t_0 , psychologically continuous with N. S is psychologically continuous with N if S's current mental features are related to N's mental features by a chain of psychological connections, which can involve memories, beliefs, desires, tendencies, personality traits, and so on.

1. This allows for the possibility that I am identical to *two* (or more) past or future people. For imagine that surgeons transplant each hemisphere of my brain into a different empty head. Both of the resulting creatures will be psychologically continuous with me. This means that, according to the Psychological Continuity View, I am (numerically) identical to *both* of those people. Yet this strikes us, or should strike us, as implausible.

a. We can avoid this result in either of two ways. First, we can adopt the multiple-occupancy view, according to which I was two distinct coinciding people all along. (Recall solution 1, the "both" solution, to the Puzzle of the Ship of Theseus.) Second, we can adopt the non-branching view, according to which I am identical to N, who is psychologically continuous with me, only if *no one other than N* is at that time psychologically continuous with me.

2. The Psychological Continuity View seems itself to *necessitate* the existence of distinct coinciding objects. "Every human animal starts out as an embryo, and may end up in a persistent vegetative state. Neither an embryo nor a human vegetable has any mental features at all, and so neither is [psychologically] continuous with anything. This shows that a human animal can persist without any sort of [psychological] continuity." According to the Psychological Continuity View, however, *I cannot* persist without some sort of psychological continuity. Thus, I cannot be identical to a human animal. Nevertheless, I think we should admit that I am in *some* sense a human animal—there is such a creature now sitting at my desk in front of a computer screen. This creature, if it is not strictly speaking identical to me, must nevertheless coincide with me. (Put another way, I *qua*

human animal must coincide with myself *qua* person.) Thus, given that these two things are distinct, the Psychological Continuity View demands the existence of distinct coinciding objects.

III. THE SOMATIC APPROACH

- a. This view maintains, in general, that “our identity through time consists in some brute physical relation. You are that past or future being that has your body, or that is the same animal as you are, or the like.”
 - i. But it seems obvious that should the two ever be separated, I would go along with my mental or psychological self rather than with my physical self.

IV. THE SIMPLE VIEW

- a. This view maintains, in general, that “[m]ental and physical continuity are evidence for identity, but do not always guarantee it, and are not required. No sort of continuity is absolutely necessary or absolutely sufficient for you to survive ... The only correct answer to the Persistence Question is that a person here now is identical with a past or future being if and only if they are identical. There are no informative, non-trivial persistence conditions for people.”