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The Problem of Personal Identity

The core of the problem of personal identity is as follows: is numerical identity or self-identity possible for a person through time? If so, what conditions must be met for a person to be identical to himself or herself at every moment in time? There are three main positions that attempt to address the problem of personal identity: the body-based view, the soul-based view, and the memory-based view. The body-based view claims that personal identity is a matter of having the same bodily structure and organizational pattern through time. This view does not propose that one’s body remains the same over time, as this is indeed not the case. The human body changes many times as cells die off and are replaced. However, these cells are reproduced in a way that conforms to the structure of our bodies. So, one could argue that he or she is the same person if his or her bodily structure is preserved through time.

The soul-based view offers that personal identity is a matter of having the same soul through time. The soul is considered a pure, unchanging entity synonymous with identity. As a result, a person is numerically identical to himself or herself over time if he or she has the same soul at each moment in time.

The third and final view put forth by John Locke, the memory-based view, argues that personal identity flows form a continuity of consciousness or memory. According to Locke, a person at one point in time is self-identical to a person at a later moment in time if the person at a later point in time remembers the experiences of the person at the earlier time.

Unfortunately, these three views unsatisfactorily answer the problem of personal identity as each one faces at least one strong objection. J.K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets* poses a dilemma to the body-based view. In the novel, Harry and Ron ingest polyjuice potion, a potion that enables its drinker to assume the bodily form of another person for an hour, to interrogate Draco Malfoy about the Heir of Slytherin undercover as Crabbe and Goyle. According to the body-based view, as the entire structure of their bodies has changed, Harry and Ron were no longer Harry and Ron once they took the polyjuice potion. However, readers and Harry and Ron themselves know that the Crabbe and Goyle imposters are indeed Harry and Ron. It does not seem as if the body-based view can be altered to take into account situations such as these as it would need to be entirely changed. As physical appearance and bodily structure and organizational pattern are all that can be used to describe a body, there is nothing else about the body that can be exploited to survive such an objection. Any attempt to revise the body-based view will result in scrapping the view altogether.

The difficulty with the soul-based view is that souls are immaterial, and as a result, it is impossible for us to do anything else but assume every person has a soul that contributes to his or her personal identity. Under the supposition that everyone has a soul, one could argue that we have no way of knowing whether or not we have the same soul over time. Souls could be constantly flowing through us or switching between us and we would never know. We could continue to act exactly as we normally do and keep the same characteristics and personality traits; however, we would not be the same people as our souls have changed. If this is the case, the soul-based view fails. As souls are non-physical, it is difficult to wrap around our heads what a soul actually is and explain how it attributes personal identity. Furthermore, we are assuming that souls are real for this view to hold, but we have no idea whether this is true or not. More knowledge on the existence of and workings of souls, both of which are inaccessible to us, are needed to alter this view.

There are a number of objections to the memory-based view some of which have been addressed by Parfit. One such concern is the forgetting objection, which says that if someone has a gap in his or her memory or forgot about something he or she did, he or she is not self-identical to the person that remembers the event. Parfit tries to revise the memory-based view to a psychology-based view, in which if a person has enough connections or continuity in memory, beliefs, and character traits from one point in time to the next one, is numerically identical to oneself.

However, Parfit’s addendum to the memory-based view does not address the issues of personal identity of a person with Multiple Personality Disorder (MPD). MPD is a mental disorder in which at least two different identities or personalities exist within a person and alternate control of his or her conduct. During the change from one personality to another, the person with MPD does not remember the previous personality. The change from one personality to another can be instantaneous, so any psychological connections from the previous identity are completely severed from the new identity. The person with MPD would not have a single continuous chain composed of memory, character traits and personality but a number of broken ones. As the case of MPD demonstrates, the mind is so complex that it is nearly impossible to amend the memory-based or psychology-based view in such a way that accounts for every possible exception.

While it is easy to dismiss the idea of personal identity as incoherent as none of the views can be amended in such a way to provide an airtight solution to the problem of personal identity, one could claim that personal identity makes sense as a necessary social construct. As a society, we assume that each individual persists through time as the same being to make our lives easier and productive. If we did not adopt the idea that we and everyone around us are the same beings through time, our lives would be filled with great confusion. During every moment of our lives, we would question whether we and the people around us are the same people. We would constantly be examining our actions and thoughts. We would wonder if we would be able to accomplish anything in the future because if the person we are now is different from a person at a later point in time our current plans may not pan out.

For example, would we be able to greet others without second guessing ourselves about the other person’s identity as well as our own? If you were about to walk past a friend you last saw two days ago, how would you be able to know that this person is the same one you saw two days ago? Should you greet this person by name? If he responds, how do you know that this person is indeed the friend you saw two days ago? Are you the same person you were when you last saw this person? Does it make any sense for you to greet this person if you are not the same person as before? During the time it took for you to ask yourself these questions and attempt to answer them, your supposed friend has walked well past you down the street. It is much easier to assume that you are identical to the self from two days ago and the friend you saw two days ago is the same person you are seeing now and greet him or her by name. As demonstrated through this example, our questioning would paralyze us in a state of confusion and render us unproductive. Why would we do anything if we did not know if we and others are the same people through time?

Personal identity is mainly a pragmatic concern. We would like to assume that we are the same people through each moment in time; however, we do not have any methods through which we can determine if this is indeed the case. Therefore, rather than worry about this problem, society has elected to assume that everyone has a personal identity. Perhaps one day there will be another view that proposes a solution to the problem of personal identity without any holes. Until then, however, we cannot be sure as to whether the idea of personal identity is incoherent or not and will continue to assume that everyone is identical to himself or herself through time order to live our lives in a productive manner.