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1 Personal Identity: Why Care?

This week and next we'll be discussing the following question:

(PI) Under what possible circumstances is a person existing at one time identical with something existing at another time?

Here are some topics that personal identity might be thought to be relevant to:

- Law—especially punishment
- Ethics, e.g., questions of promise-keeping
- Practical Rationality

It may help to keep the above issues in mind when thinking about personal identity—often a helpful way of trying to get a grip on the question of whether some later person is the same person as some earlier person involves asking whether the earlier person should try to ensure that the later person is well off, or whether the later person should be punished for the crimes of the earlier person, or whether the later person is obligated to keep the promises of the earlier person.

2 Two Views about Personal Identity

(Body) If X is a person, then X is the same person as Y just in case Y has the same body as X .

(Memory) If X is a person who exists at some time t , and Y exists at some time $t' > t$, then X is the same person as Y just in case Y has X 's memories.

3 Examples

Freaky Friday: There are lots of cases like Locke's case of the prince and the cobbler in fiction. Imagine a version of such a case where person Curly's brain is put in Moe's body, and vice versa. After the transplant, who's who?

- (a) What does the body view say?
- (b) What does the memory view say?
- (c) Which (if either) seems right?

Memory Transfer: A ruthless serial killer (who's also a brilliant neuroscientist) has a terminal disease, but before he dies he kidnaps Joe and implants his memories into Joe's brain. Joe now has, in addition to all his old memories, a new set of gruesome memories—memories of committing various murders. Joe is repulsed by these memories, and tries not to bring them to mind, but he can recall every detail of the killer's heinous acts. After the transfer, is Joe the same person as the person that committed the murders?

Questions:

- (a) What does the Body view say about this case?
- (b) What about the memory view? If the answer isn't clear (because the view wasn't defined clearly enough), what are some of the options?
- (c) What should we say about this case? Keep in mind the issues mentioned in §1—should Joe be punished? Should Joe feel guilty?

Memory Loss: Suppose a young student is fined for overdue library books. Later, as a middle-aged lawyer, she remembers paying the fine. Later still, in her dotage, she remembers her law career, but has entirely forgotten not only paying the fine but everything else she did in her youth. (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy)

Consider the following questions, from the perspective of the body view and the memory view:

- (a) Is the old woman the same as the lawyer?
- (b) Is the lawyer the same as the young student?
- (c) Is the young student the same as the old woman?
- (d) Is there a tension between the answers the memory view gives to the above 3 questions? If so, is there a version of the memory view that avoids the tension?

Far Future: Suppose we get quite good at cybernetics. As time passes, your body parts will be replaced by cybernetic implants, and you'll lose your memories of the early part of your life. 100 years from now, there will be a conscious robot that has none of your personality or memories or body parts, but it will share many body parts/personality traits/memories with an earlier entity which will share many body parts/personality traits/memories with an early entity which will...and so on all the way down to an entity which will share many body/parts/personality traits/memories with you. Are you the same person as the future robot?

- (a) Should you invest in long-term bonds that will only mature in 100 years?
- (b) Should the robot feel guilty for bad things you did? Proud for the good things?

4 Souls

Another view about personality identity is the following:

(Soul) X is the same person as Y just in case X has the same immaterial soul as Y .

Reincarnation: Suppose you're going to be reincarnated. After you die, your immaterial soul will inhabit the body of an infant. The infant will have no memories of your life, nor will the infant's personality be anything like yours, nor will there be any distinctive physical similarities between you and the infant (beyond physical similarities that hold between any two humans).

- (a) Suppose you are relatively wealthy at the end of your life. Would it be rational (in a self-interested sense) for you to give some of your money to the parents of the infant, to ensure that it grows up comfortably?
- (b) Suppose the infant finds out that it has your immaterial soul. Should it feel proud of the good things you did in life, or guilty for the bad things you did?
- (c) Suppose we find some way of reliably identifying immaterial souls. If it is legally verified that I have the immaterial soul of some now dead person, should I be bound by contracts the dead person signed?

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24.00 Problems in Philosophy
Fall 2010

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