

Personal Identity

Imagine a photo of yourself when you were a child. "That is me!" you say. How might you reply if someone says, "Explain WHY that is you. What is it that connects you to this child in such a way that you and this child are one and the same person?"

Presumably, you've continued to exist over time. But, what grounds this continuation of our existence? In short, what are the criteria for the **persistence of personal identity**?

Persons: First, note that, by "person" it is meant the conscious, rational, emotional, self-aware "self" that is you. When you look inward and identify, "That is me" or "I exist", THAT is the person I'll be referring to.

Two Tests for Identity: Consider one person (A) at time-1, and another person (B) at a later time, time-2. For instance, imagine that you are looking at a photo of someone taken in 2010, and another of someone in 2020. Intuitively, the following are true:

1. Anticipation of Future Experiences: It would be rational or appropriate for person A to anticipate the future experiences of person B (e.g., be excited about B's successes, fear B's pains, etc.) if and only if A and B are one and the same person. (*And NOT rational or appropriate if and only if A and B are NOT the same person.*)

(For instance, do YOU expect to have the experience of obtaining a college degree, or will it be some stranger with your name who receives it? What do YOU expect to experience tomorrow morning when the person who looks like you wakes up? Etc.)

2. Fair Praise & Blame: It would be fair, or just, to punish B for A's crimes, or reward B for A's good deeds—in short, to hold B accountable for A's actions—if and only if A and B are one and the same person. (*And UN-just or UN-fair to do so if and only if A and B are NOT the same person.*)

These two intuitive claims will help to guide us in determining what it is that makes someone the same person over time.

[**On the possibility of an afterlife:** In Perry's dialogue, the question of personal identity is asked in the context of a question about the afterlife.

Consider: Is the afterlife even POSSIBLE? If so, it needs to be the case that YOU, the person reading this, are the SAME person as some future individual in heaven (or wherever). But, what conditions need to be met in order for that person to be YOU?]

1. The Body Theory: One view states that it is your BODY that constitutes your identity. The child in the photo is the same person as you because you both share the same body—that is, the same MATTER. During the time between that photo and now, there has existed one continuous, living, bodily organism—and that organism is YOU.

Objection: But, wait. The child in the photo and I do NOT have the same body! For one thing, I'm much taller, and weigh a lot more! We don't even share many of the same atoms! As we age, our cells are constantly dying, and we're constantly replenishing them; our bodies are constantly losing mass (by excretion, or converting it to energy, etc.) and gaining mass (by eating, drinking). If the body theory were true, a person beginning a meal would never be the same person as the one who finished it. A prisoner could shave off a few skin cells and claim that he is now a different person as the one who was convicted, and should therefore be freed.

For this reason, we'll probably want to adopt the **gradual replacement principle** for material objects. (*Refer back to Theseus*)

But note also that when people lose arms or legs, we still judge them to be the same person. They can lose kidneys too, and get heart transplants. We might even imagine a lonely brain in a vat of nutrients being stimulated to have conscious experiences by a computer simulation. In sum: Plausibly, your WHOLE body is not required for your continued existence. For this reason, body theorists typically clarify that only some PART of your body is required for your continued existence—namely, your **brain**.

Bodily resurrection?: Is an afterlife POSSIBLE on the bodily view? Perhaps there could be an afterlife if God resurrected our bodies (or brains). The person living the afterlife would be YOU because it would be the SAME BODY (or, brain) that is resuscitated.

Problem: But, most of the bodies of people in history are completely gone—decayed and returned to dust, or ashes. What happens in those cases?

Solution?: Perhaps God give us new bodies in the afterlife, which are not composed of the same MATERIAL, but are merely exact DUPLICATES of our original bodies.

Problem: It does not seem that an exact duplicate of my body would really be ME. "Exactly similar" is not the same as "identical." Consider:

Kleenex: You have a Kleenex box in your bathroom. For fun during one of your parties, I set fire to the box, reducing it to ashes. You hear about this and become angry. But, the next day, I bring you an EXACTLY SIMILAR box that I just bought at the store. "Look. It's the same box," I say.

But, clearly this is not the SAME box. It's merely an indistinguishable duplicate of the original. But, the original itself is gone, reduced to ash. So, it seems that, if the afterlife contained some person with a body that looked exactly like mine, though that person may LOOK like me, it would not BE me. Consider: Imagine that God is going to create a body in heaven that LOOKS just like you (and will even have your memories, personality, etc.), but your current body will rot in the ground. Would you be excited about going to heaven? It may seem irrational or inappropriate for you to be excited about your duplicate's future experiences. If so, then, on the body view, an afterlife is only possible if God resurrects ONE AND THE VERY SAME BODY as the one that is buried.

We need to distinguish between two ways in which the term "identical" is often used:

Qualitative Identity: Being exactly similar; having all of the same observable qualities, or properties; being qualitatively indistinguishable (LOOKS the same); for example, two "identical" twins or two cans of soup are qualitatively identical.

Numerical Identity: Being ONE in number; i.e., when "two" things are numerically identical, they are not really TWO things at all, but rather ONE AND THE SAME THING. For instance, Mark Twain is numerically identical to Samuel Clemens. That is, if I point to one and then the other, in total, I have only pointed to one thing.

So, in other words: It seems that, if God were to create a merely **qualitatively** identical duplicate of you in heaven, this would not be enough to constitute an afterlife. Rather, what is needed seems to be **numerical** identity.

2. The Psychological Theory: But, now consider this story:

Amnesia Surgery: You are diagnosed with a fatal disease. There IS a cure, but it requires a surgery which will erase your mind. You are given two options: (1) Live 5 more years of a painless, happy life and then die painlessly of the disease. During those 5 years, you keep your memories, personality, etc. (2) Have an operation right away, which will cure your body of its illness so that your body will live 50 more years of a painless, happy life. However, your mind will be erased such that, when your body recovers, it will not remember any of your current friends or family. It will retain the ability to read and write, drive a car, etc., but is unlikely to develop the same personality, opinions, preferences, goals, or desires. Your body on the other side of the surgery may or may not end up acting NOTHING LIKE you act currently.

Would you prefer to have the surgery or die in 5 years? If you choose the surgery, would it be rational for you to anticipate the future experiences of the person in post-surgery recovery? Or fair to reward them for your deeds (e.g., do they get credit for this course)?

If you would choose to die in 5 years, this seems to indicate that it is MEMORY or PSYCHOLOGY that is important for retaining personal identity. On this view, you are the same person as the child in the photo because you both share one psychologically continuous stream of consciousness. For instance, you REMEMBER being that child, so you ARE the same person as that child. (*Note: There is an important respect in which you and the child clearly do NOT have the SAME psychology. Obviously, you have different memories, beliefs, etc. from the child. But there is CONTINUITY of psychology from that child to you; a gradual replacement, if you will, of memories, beliefs, and so on over time.*)

Still not convinced? Consider another story:

Day Man and Night Man: In one body, every morning at dawn, a man wakes up and goes about his life by the name Day Man. Every evening at sunset, however, he completely forgets everything that he has done that day, and “wakes up” and goes about a completely different life by the name Night Man. Day Man and Night Man are completely unaware of each other, live completely different lives, and have completely different sets of memories—yet, they share the same body.

It seems to most of us that there are two people—or “persons”—sharing the same body here. The key to their distinct identities seems to be separate consciousness, or separate sets of memories. This seems to lend support to the conclusion that it is PSYCHOLOGY—not body—that grounds our identities. Think about it: If the bodily criterion were true, we should conclude that there is only ONE person in the story above (for there is only one body). But, clearly, it would be irrational for Day Man to anticipate the future experiences of Night Man, or vice versa. And clearly it would be unjust to punish Day Man for Night Man’s crimes, or vice versa. [*Do you agree?*]

One more example:

The Prince and the Cobbler: Imagine that a prince and a cobbler go to sleep one night, in their respective homes. When the body that went to sleep in the cobbler’s bed wakes up, he thinks he is the prince, he claims to be the prince, has all of the memories of the prince, etc. Meanwhile, the prince’s body wakes up, and claims to be a cobbler, has all of the memories of the cobbler, etc. (*This is just like what happens in the movie, Freaky Friday*)

Many have the intuition that the prince now inhabits the body of the cobbler and vice versa. This seems to suggest that we do not think the body is what constitutes identity. At least, it does not seem incoherent to propose that what has happened here is that two people have woken up in different bodies. (*Or consider Kafka’s Metamorphosis, in which the main character wakes up in the body of a giant cockroach.*)

Problem: Now, what are we to make of cases like the following?

Teletransporter: There is a machine that is said to be able to “transport” individuals from one place to another. This machine works in the following way: You step into a booth, where a device scans your body. It then creates an exact bodily duplicate of that body in another booth, in another location. The original body in the first booth is then destroyed.

Would the DUPLICATE who steps out of the second booth be YOU? Would you be willing to be “transported” by such a device? In shows such as Star Trek, it is assumed that the person who steps out of the second booth IS the same person as the one who stepped into the first booth. If that verdict is correct, then it is PSYCHOLOGY rather than BODY that grounds the continuation of identity (for, remember, the original body is destroyed during teletransportation).

But, is this right? Imagine that the first person’s body is NOT destroyed. It seems clearer in this case that the person who steps out of the second booth is NOT you. For YOU are still standing in the FIRST booth. The duplicate is merely someone who LOOKS a lot LIKE you—even has the same memories and personality as you. But, they are not numerically identical to you (rather, they are only qualitatively identical). (For illustration, see John Weldon’s cartoon, “[To Be](#)” and CGP Grey’s “[The Trouble With Transporters](#)”)

Consider the situation more closely: At t_1 , in an experiment at W&M, Chad (A) says “Beam me up! They’re sending me to Paris!” At t_2 , the teletransporter creates a Chad in Paris, but fails to vaporize the Chad at W&M due to a malfunction. So, at t_2 we appear to have two individuals claiming to be the real Chad: W&M-Chad (B) and Paris-Chad (C). Who is the real Chad? According to psychological continuity view, they are BOTH Chad. For BOTH of them are psychologically continuous with the guy who said “Beam me up!” But, that can’t be right. For, then, that would mean:

$$A=B$$

and

$$A=C$$

But, then, by transitivity, this would entail that:

$$B=C$$

In other words, W&M-Chad and Paris-Chad are NUMERICALLY ONE PERSON. This is clearly false. And worse, it fails our two tests: It would be unjust to punish W&M-Chad for Paris-Chad’s crimes; and irrational for him to fear Paris-Chad’s pains; etc.

The problem: In the malfunctioning transporter case, the psychological continuity view entails that there are TWO of the same person. This is impossible. Therefore, the psychological continuity view is false.

[Note: Teletransporters seem to do the same thing that we considered God doing above; namely, creating a copy of your body, while your original body is rotting in the ground.]

The problem above arose because psychological continuity view allows for DUPLICATES. So, the following case may help to illuminate the problem further. Consider:

Fake Trump: Sam Miller goes to sleep in his home. In the morning, the person who wakes up in his bed thinks he is Donald Trump. He has all of the memories of Trump; he can even recall private details of Trump's life that only Trump would know. He is arrested on the White House lawn, while struggling and insisting that he is the president of the United States of America.

Is this person Donald Trump? If all that is required in order to BE Trump is psychological continuity, then this person on the white house lawn IS Trump. But, that is Absurd. For, at the same time, there is a man inside the white house who ALSO claims to be Trump. There cannot be TWO of the same person. That is impossible. Clearly, in this example, we only think ONE of the two people is the REAL Trump. The other person—namely, the one being arrested—is a FAKE Trump, an IMPOSTER.

Solution: Perhaps the psychological continuity theory could be repaired. Perhaps the thing that makes someone the same person is that they have a GENUINE continuity of consciousness (i.e., not a fake one).

Problem: This account is circular. "Circularity" occurs whenever the definition of a word makes use of the very word that is being defined IN the definition itself. To insist that psychological continuity must be GENUINE is the same as saying that this continuity must be the sort that preserves personal identity. But "personal identity" is THE VERY WORD WE ARE TRYING TO DEFINE. In other words, the revised account is saying, "**Sameness of person** = Psychological continuity, but only the sort of continuity where there is **sameness of person.**"

[A Hybrid Approach? Plausibly, the reason it seems that the man in the White House is the real Donald Trump (rather than the Sam-Miller-Trump), and that W&M-Chad is the real Chad (rather than Paris Chad) is because, in addition to psychological continuity, these individuals ALSO have BODILY continuity with the person in question. So, perhaps the continuation of your "self" requires a continuation of both your psychology AND your body? Retain both, you continue living. Lose one or the other (or both), you die.]

3. The Soul Theory: There is another theory of personal identity which states that each of us has some IMMATERIAL, NON-PHYSICAL thing inside of us. This thing is called a "soul," and your soul is the thing that makes you YOU. In other words, the child in the photo is the same person as you because you both have the same immaterial SOUL; and a soul is just some invisible, immaterial thing that inhabits our bodies.

Regarding the afterlife, on the soul view, an afterlife would be quite possible, because God could just put your soul into some other body, and whatever body that soul inhabited would be YOU.

[Note: A soul is NOT ghost-like (as is often depicted in movies), but is rather totally invisible and undetectable. It is NON-PHYSICAL. In other words, it is NOT the sort of thing that physicists detect. Obviously, ghosts that are visible are detectable. Others sometimes say that [the soul weighs 21 grams](#). But, that is impossible. Souls do not have mass.

If you think that what YOU are is something that is physically observable (e.g., can be seen, or weighed, etc.), then what you really hold is not a soul view, but some version of a body view. Only, rather than the whole body, or even just the brain, your view is that the "self" is some wispiest, more vaporous thing—but something physical nevertheless.]

Problem: Since souls are non-physical, they cannot be perceived with the senses. You cannot see, touch, or smell something that is devoid of all matter or energy. But, then, when you claim that the child in the photo is the same person as you, you are making the claim that you and the child have the same soul. However, there is absolutely no observable evidence for this claim. You cannot perceive the soul, so how could you possibly know (even in PRINCIPLE) that you and the child have the same soul?

It seems that we can very easily know when some person is the same person that we met yesterday, or 5 years ago. If the soul were the thing that made one the same person over time, then it would not be easy to know whether or not some person is the same person that we met previously. For all we know, souls are constantly jumping in and out of bodies. If they WERE, there would be no way to tell. For instance, for all I know, Abraham Lincoln's soul is presently the soul that resides in my body. If so, then I *AM* Abraham Lincoln. That is, he and I are numerically one and the same person. But, even if that were true, the fact that he and I share some immaterial substance in common seems irrelevant to my identity (just as the fact that most of the material substance in my body—e.g., my atoms—were once in plants, and dinosaurs, and perhaps even other human beings seems irrelevant to my identity). Nor would it seem appropriate to praise or reward me for Lincoln's good deeds in this case. So, souls just do not seem to be the thing by which we judge sameness of person over time.