

Haecceitism (or, Primitive 'Thisness')

1. Introduction: Robert Adams contrasts two terms:

Thisness: An individual's IDENTITY; i.e., its ESSENCE, or whatever makes some individual X have the property of 'being identical to X'.

Suchness: The purely QUALITATIVE features of an individual; i.e., its observable, discernible properties.

An individual's suchness is constituted by both its qualitatively discernible intrinsic properties (e.g., being red, being spherical, being 1 foot in diameter, etc.) as well as its qualitatively discernible relational properties (e.g., being 1 foot from a sphere).

The question Adams tackles is: Is an individual's "thisness" always dependent on its "suchness"? That is, is thisness purely qualitative? Or rather, is it irreducible to purely qualitative properties?

Note that, if an individual's origin is its essence, then thisness IS qualitative. For instance, originating from a particular sperm and egg is a qualitatively discernible property. But, having seen the problems that such a view is faced with, we might wonder whether identity is really something primitive and indiscernible. Adams argues that identity IS primitive in this way. He calls this view *haecceitism*.

Haecceitism: The view that identity is not dependent on qualitatively discernible properties.

Haecceitism is the rejection of the Identity of Indiscernibles:

The Identity of Indiscernibles: No two numerically distinct individuals can share all of their suchnesses; rather, they must differ in some suchness (relational or non-relational, or both). That is, if "two" individuals have all and only exactly the same qualitative properties, then they are really one and the same individual.

2. Max Black's Globes: Adams draws our attention to the fact that there IS a refutation of the Identity of Indiscernibles, given by Max Black. Recall that, in Black's thought experiment, there is a possible world consisting of only two indiscernible iron spheres. The two objects have all of the same intrinsic properties (being perfectly spherical, being made of iron, etc.) and relational properties (being 2 diameters from an iron globe, etc.)

Black concludes that, here we have a case of two objects that ARE numerically distinct, which do NOT have any difference in "suchness" (i.e., the two objects are indiscernible, having no qualitative differences). Therefore, the Identity of Indiscernibles is false.

Adams points out that Black's thought experiment relies on spatial distance—but we might also consider an example that instead uses temporal distance. For instance, imagine a cyclical world, which has always existed, but where the events there constantly repeat in cycles. Perhaps it is even the case that OUR world is like that (e.g., if there is an endless cycle of Big Bangs followed by Big Crunches, and in which every cycle is qualitatively identical to the previous one). Here again, we would have a possible world where there are numerically distinct individuals which are not qualitatively distinct.

3. Almost Indiscernible Twins: Adams improves on Black's argument.

Those who believe Black's thought experiment to be problematic would probably NOT object to the following one:

Black's Barely Discernible Balls: Imagine a possible world where there were two NEARLY indiscernible iron globes, where their only qualitative difference was that one globe had a tiny chemical impurity that the other did not.

Those who endorse the Identity of Indiscernibles should have no problem with the metaphysical possibility of such a world. For, that principle is not violated. Here we have two numerically distinct individuals, and they DO differ in some "suchness"; namely, one globe has the chemical impurity, while the other does not.

But, now, imagine that the globe with the tiny impurity slowly lost its impurity. Surely we can imagine this, right? But, if the Identity of Indiscernibles is true, we must conclude that this COULD NOT happen! Some deep metaphysical feature of the universe would necessarily block such a change. For, due to the existence of the other globe, the globe with its impurity could never lose that impurity—because if it did, then there would suddenly exist two numerically distinct but qualitatively indiscernible individuals (an impossibility according to this principle). But, that seems absurd. Therefore, we should abandon the Identity of Indiscernibles. Consider another (similar) case:

Adams' Barely Discernible Dragon Dreams: Imagine a possible world (w) where there are two ALMOST qualitatively indiscernible twins who both look exactly like Robert Adams. The only qualitative difference between them is that one night, one twin has a dream about a fire-breathing dragon with 10 horns, while the other twin has a dream about a fire-breathing dragon with only 7 horns.

Such a world is NOT a violation of the Identity of Indiscernibles. But, now: Imagine another possible world (w') where the first twin dreams of a dragon which has only 7 horns instead of 10. Is w' POSSIBLE? Adams believes that the answer should be clearly YES. For, surely, there is no deep necessity in the universe which demands that the first twin's dream MUST involve a 10-horned dragon rather than a 7-horned one! However, the proponent of the Identity of Indiscernibles must insist that the answer is NO. Again (Adams states), that is absurd.

Interestingly, Adams points out that, even if you only accept the Adam's Barely Discernible Dragon Dreams case, you have already abandoned the Identity of Indiscernibles. For, imagine that the different dreams occur when the two twins are 27 years old. This means that, prior to that day, the two individuals were qualitatively indiscernible. But, presumably they were numerically distinct BEFORE their differing dreams! Therefore, prior to those dreams, we already had a violation of the Identity of Indiscernibles.

4. Transworld Identity: But, now, consider even further: Imagine yet another possible world (w'') where the first twin dreams of a dragon which has only 7 horns but the second twin dreams of a dragon with 10 horns. Isn't such a world possible? Adams believes so. Notice, though, that we have discovered something very interesting: Let's call the two twins Castor and Pollux. Worlds w and w'' are absolutely qualitatively indiscernible (there is NO way to tell them apart), and yet in w , it is Castor that has the 7-horned dream (and Pollux the 10-horned dream), while in w'' it is Pollux that has the 7-horned dream (and Castor the 10-horned dream).

Or, for a simpler case, imagine Max Black's world, where there exist two qualitatively indiscernible globes (call the Castor and Pollux). Now consider that world, along with two others:

- w_1 – The two globes, Castor and Pollux, have always existed, and will always exist.
- w_2 – The two globes have always existed. One day Castor goes out of existence.
- w_3 – The two globes have always existed. One day Pollux goes out of existence.

Surely, Adams says, if w_1 is possible then so are w_2 and w_3 . But note that w_2 and w_3 are qualitatively indiscernible. If you observed w_2 and w_3 , you would not be able to tell them apart. And yet they ARE different, since in w_2 it is Pollux that survives, while in w_3 it is Castor that survives. What we have here is a difference in identity of possible worlds without a qualitative difference.

Adams believes these thought experiments to support the thesis that there are **possible worlds that differ in thisness, but not in suchness**. Or, in other words, there are worlds that are qualitatively indiscernible, but numerically distinct. As Adams notes:

Any case of this sort, in which two possible worlds differ in the transworld identities of their individuals but not in their suchnesses, provides us at once with a clearer proof of a primitive transworld identity.

Therefore, the Identity of Indiscernibles is also false for **transworld** identity.

5. Moderate Haecceitism: So far, Adams has established that there can be a difference in identity without a difference in qualitative features. But, note that he does NOT believe that identity has NOTHING to do with qualitative features. That is absurd. For, surely you could not have been, say, a musical performance rather than a human being. Could you have been an alligator? Or a roller skate? Surely not. Adams writes:

that there cannot be any purely qualitative necessary condition for the possession of any given thisness, is absurd, however. It implies that you and I, for example, could have been individuals of any sort whatever—plutonium atoms, noises, football games, places, or times, if those are all individuals. If we cannot trust our intuition that we could not have been any of those things, then it is probably a waste of time to study *de re* modalities at all. If there are any transworld identities and non-identities, there are necessary connections between thisnesses and some suchnesses.

All that Adams has concluded so far is that there exist no set of qualitative properties that are necessary and sufficient for any given identity; i.e., none of your discernible features are such that you both (i) **could not fail to have had them, AND** (ii) that **no other individual could have possessed them**.

But, perhaps some of your discernible features ARE such that you merely could not fail to have had them (though they are not features that are unique to you; i.e., other individuals COULD, and usually DO in fact possess them). For instance, it is probably the case that you could not have failed to be human. That is, there is no possible world in which you exist, but are not a human being.

This view—that (i) there can be difference of identity independent of difference in qualitative features, but that (ii) there are still SOME necessary connections between identity and other qualitative features—Adams calls '**Moderate Haecceitism**'. (Extreme Haecceitism would accept (i), but reject (ii); i.e., you could have been a roller skate).

6. Objection to Haecceitism: Graeme Forbes writes,

you are invited to imagine a possible circumstance in which The Eiffel Tower does not exist but in which exactly the same events occur up to and including 30 June 1887, and on July 1 the same 250 men assemble the same 18,000 precision-manufactured pieces in precisely the same way as they actually did, using precisely the same 2,500,000 rivets in precisely the same positions, under the direction of Gustave Eiffel. You are also to imagine that during the construction period and thereafter, there is to be no further difference between the actual course of events and the imagined possible course of events. Yet The Eiffel Tower is not to exist.

Is this a possible scenario? That is, is there a possible world where a tower is built in Paris from exactly the same parts, arranged in exactly the same way, built by exactly the same men, according to exactly the same blueprints, designed by exactly the same designer as The Eiffel Tower was actually built and designed by—but where that tower is NOT The Eiffel Tower? To Forbes, this seems absurd. If it is, then we must resist haecceitism. Rather, intuitively, it DOES seem as if there can be no difference in identity without a qualitative difference.

Why should we care? If haecceitism is true (i.e., if there can be differences in identity without a qualitative difference), then there is a possible world that is indistinguishable from the actual world—that is, every single discernible feature of the actual world is duplicated in that possible world—but where the person writing this is YOU, and the person reading it is ME. In short, the haecceitist is committed to the conclusion that I could have lived your life (been born from your parents, had your experiences, looked exactly like you, etc.), and you could have lived mine! To most of us, that seems absurd. And yet, Max Black's and Robert Adams's arguments for haecceitism are so powerful! (and the attempts to ground identities in qualitative features—e.g., origin—are, as we have seen, so fraught with problems). So: How should we respond to them?