

Riddles of Existence

A Guided Tour of Metaphysics

New Edition

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CLARENDON PRESS · OXFORD

OXFORD
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Great Clarendon Street, Oxford, OX2 6DP,
United Kingdom

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First published in 2005

First published in paperback 2007

New edition published in 2014

Impression: 1

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Published in the United States of America by Oxford University Press
198 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016, United States of America

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
Data available

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014937007

ISBN 978-0-19-872404-9

Printed in Great Britain by
Clays Ltd, St Ives plc

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CHAPTER I

Personal Identity

Theodore Sider

The Concept of Personal Identity

On trial for murder, you decide to represent yourself. You are not the murderer, you say; the murderer was a *different person* from you. The judge asks for your evidence. Do you have photographs of a mustachioed intruder? Don't your fingerprints match those on the murder weapon? Can you show that the murderer is left-handed? No, you say. Your defense is very different. Here are your closing arguments:

I concede that the murderer is a righty, like me, has the same fingerprints as I do, is clean-shaven like me. He even looks exactly like me in the surveillance camera photographs introduced by the defense. No, I have no twin. In fact, I admit that I remember committing the murder! But the murderer is not the same person as me, for I have changed. That person's favorite rock band was Led Zeppelin; I now prefer Todd Rundgren. That person had an appendix, but I do not; mine was removed last week. That person was 25 years old; I am 30. I am not the same person as that murderer of five years ago. Therefore you cannot punish me, for no one is guilty of a crime committed by *someone else*.

Obviously, no court of law would buy this argument. And yet, what is wrong with it? When someone changes, whether

physically or psychologically, isn't it true that he's 'not the same person'?

Yes, but the phrase 'the same person' is ambiguous. There are two ways we can talk about one person's being the same as another. When a person has a religious conversion or shaves his head, he is *dissimilar* to how he was before. He does not remain **qualitatively** the same person, let us say. So in one sense he is not 'the same person'. But in another sense he *is* the same person: no other person has taken his place. This second kind of sameness is called **numerical** sameness, since it is the sort of sameness expressed by the equals sign in mathematical statements like ' $2+2=4$ ': the expressions ' $2+2$ ' and ' 4 ' stand for one and the same number. You are numerically the same person you were when you were a baby, although you are qualitatively very different. The closing arguments in the trial confuse the two kinds of sameness. You have indeed changed since the commission of the crime: you are qualitatively not the same. But you are numerically the same person as the murderer; no *other* person murdered the victim. It is true that 'no one can be punished for crimes committed by someone else'. But 'someone else' here means someone numerically distinct from you.

The concept of numerical sameness is important in human affairs. It affects whom we can punish, for it is unjust to punish anyone numerically distinct from the wrongdoer. It also plays a crucial role in emotions such as anticipation, regret, and remorse. You can't feel the same sort of regret or remorse for the mistakes of others that you can feel for your own mistakes. You can't anticipate the pleasures to be experienced by someone else, no matter how qualitatively similar to you that other person may be. The question of what makes persons numerically the same over time is known to philosophers as the question of **personal identity**.

The question of personal identity may be dramatized by an example. Imagine that you are very curious about what the

future will be like. One day you catch God in a particularly good mood; she promises to bring you back to life five hundred years after your death, so that you can experience the future. At first you are understandably excited, but then you begin to wonder. How will God insure that it is *you* in the future? Five hundred years from now you will have died and your body will have rotted away. The matter now making you up will, by then, be scattered across the surface of the earth. God could easily create a new person out of new matter who resembles you, but that's no comfort. You want *yourself* to exist in the future; someone merely like you just won't cut it.

This example makes the problem of personal identity particularly vivid, but notice that the same issues are raised by ordinary change over time. Looking back at baby pictures, you say 'that was me'. But why? What makes that baby the same person as you, despite all the changes you have undergone in the intervening years?

(Philosophers also reflect on the identity over time of objects other than persons; they reflect on what makes an electron, tree, bicycle, or nation the same at one time as another. These objects raise many of the same questions that persons do, and some new ones as well. But persons are particularly fascinating. For one thing, only personal identity connects with emotions such as regret and anticipation. For another, *we* are persons. It is only natural that we take particular interest in ourselves.)

So how could God make it be you in the future? As noted, it is not enough to reconstitute, out of new matter, a person physically similar to you. That would be mere qualitative similarity. Would it help to use the same matter? God could gather all the protons, neutrons, and electrons that now constitute your body but will then be spread over the earth's surface, and form them into a person. For good measure, she could even make this new person look like you. But it wouldn't *be* you. It would be a new

person made out of your old matter. If you don't agree, then consider this. Never mind the future; for all you know, the matter that now makes up your body once made up the body of another person thousands of years ago. It is incredibly unlikely, but nevertheless possible, that all the matter from some ancient Greek statesman has recycled through the biosphere and found its way into you. Clearly, that would not make you numerically identical to that statesman. You should not be punished for his crimes; you could not regret his misdeeds. Sameness of matter is not sufficient for personal identity.

Nor is it necessary. At least, *exact* sameness of matter isn't necessary for personal identity. People survive gradual changes in their matter all the time. They ingest and excrete, cut their hair and shed bits of skin, and sometimes have new skin or other matter grafted or implanted onto their bodies. In fact, normal processes of ingestion and excretion recycle nearly all of your matter every few years. Yet you're still you. Personal identity isn't especially tied to sameness of matter. So what is it tied to?

The Soul

Some philosophers and religious thinkers answer: the soul. A person's soul is her psychological essence, a non-physical entity in which thoughts and feelings take place. The soul continues unscathed through all manner of physical change to the body, and can even survive the body's total destruction. Your soul is what makes you *you*. The baby in the pictures is you because the very same soul that now inhabits your body then inhabited that baby's body. So God can bring you back to life in the future by making a new body and inserting your soul into it.

Souls might seem to provide quick answers to many philosophical perplexities about identity over time, but there is no good reason to believe that they exist. Philosophers used to argue

that souls must be posited in order to explain the existence of thoughts and feelings, since thoughts and feelings don't seem to be part of the physical body. But this argument is undermined by contemporary science. Human beings have long known that one part of the body—the brain—is especially connected to mentality. Even before contemporary neuroscience, head injuries were known to cause psychological damage. We now know how particular bits of the brain are connected with particular psychological effects. Although we are far from being able to completely correlate psychological states with brain states, we have made sufficient progress that the existence of such a correlation is a reasonable hypothesis. It is sensible to conclude that mentality itself resides in the brain, and that the soul does not exist. It's not that brain science *disproves* the soul; souls *could* exist even though brains and psychological states are perfectly correlated. But if the physical brain explains mentality on its own, there is no need to postulate souls in addition.

Also, soul theorists have a hard time explaining how souls manage to think. *Brain* theorists have the beginnings of an explanation: the brain contains billions of neurons, whose incredibly complex interactions produce thought. No one knows exactly how this works, but neuroscientists have at least made a good start. The soul theorist has nothing comparable to say, for most soul theorists think that the soul has no smaller parts. Souls are not made up of billions of little bitty soul-particles. (If they were, they would no longer provide quick answers to philosophical perplexities about identity over time. Soul theorists would face the same difficult philosophical questions the rest of us face. For instance: what makes a soul the same over time, despite changes to its soul-particles?) But if souls have no little bitty soul-particles, they have nothing like neurons to help them do their stuff. How, then, do they do it?

Spatiotemporal Continuity and the Case of the Prince and the Cobbler

Setting aside souls, let's turn to scientific theories, which base personal identity on natural phenomena. One such theory uses the concept of **spatiotemporal continuity**. Consider the identity over time of an inanimate object such as a baseball. A pitcher holds a baseball and starts his windup; moments later, a baseball is in the catcher's mitt. Are the baseballs the same? How will we decide? It is easiest if we have kept our eyes on the ball. A **continuous series**—a series of locations in space and time containing a baseball, the first in the pitcher's hand, later locations in the intervening places and times, and the final one in the catcher's mitt—convinces us that the catcher's baseball is the same as the pitcher's. If we observe no such continuous series, we may suspect that the baseballs are different. Now, we don't usually need this method to identify a person over time, since most people look very different from one another, but it could come in handy when dealing with identical twins. Want to know whether it is Billy Bob or Bobby Bill in the jail cell? First compile information from surveillance tape or informants. Then, using this information, trace a continuous series from the person in the jail backward in time, and see which twin it leads to.

Everyone agrees that spatiotemporal continuity is a good practical guide to personal identity. But as philosophers we want more. We want to discover the *essence* of personal identity; we want to know *what it is* to have personal identity, not merely how to tell when personal identity is present. If you want to know whether a man is a bachelor, checking to see whether his apartment is messy is a decent practical guide; if you want to tell whether a metal is gold, visual inspection and weighing on a scale will yield the right answer nine times out of ten. But having a messy apartment is not the *essence* of being a bachelor, for *some* bachelors are neat. Weighing a certain amount and appearing a

certain way are not the essence of being gold, for it is possible for a metal to appear to be gold (in all superficial respects) but nevertheless not really *be* gold. (Think of fool's gold.) The true essence of being a bachelor is being an unmarried male; the true essence of being gold is having atomic number 79. For in no possible circumstance whatsoever is something a bachelor without being an unmarried man, and in no possible circumstance is something gold without having atomic number 79. All we require of practical guides for detecting bachelors or gold is that they work most of the time, but philosophical accounts of essence must work in all possible circumstances. The **spatiotemporal continuity theory** says that spatiotemporal continuity is indeed the essence of personal identity, not just that it is a good practical guide. Personal identity just *is* spatiotemporal continuity.

The theory must be refined a bit if it is really to work in every possible circumstance. Suppose you are captured, put into a pot, and melted into soup. Although we can trace a continuous series from you to the soup, the soup is not you. After being melted, you no longer exist; the matter that once composed you now composes something else. So we had better refine the spatiotemporal continuity theory to read as follows: persons are numerically identical if and only if they are spatiotemporally continuous via a series of *persons*. You are connected to the soup by a continuous series all right, but the later members of the series are portions of soup, not people.

Further refinements are possible (including saying that any change of matter in a continuous series must occur gradually, or saying that earlier members of such a series *cause* later members). But let's instead press on to a very interesting example introduced by the seventeenth-century British philosopher John Locke. In Locke's example, a certain prince wonders what it would be like to live as a lowly cobbler. A cobbler reciprocally dreams of life as a prince. One day, they get their chance: *the entire psychologies of the prince and the cobbler are swapped*. The

body of the cobbler comes to have all the memories, knowledge, and character traits of the prince, whose psychology has in turn departed for the cobbler's body. Locke himself spoke of souls: the souls of the prince and the cobbler are swapped. But let's change his story: suppose the swap occurs because the brains of the prince and the cobbler are altered, without any transfer of soul or matter, by an evil scientist. Although this is far-fetched, it is far from inconceivable. Science tells us that mental states depend on the arrangement of the brain's neurons. That arrangement could in principle be altered to become exactly like the arrangement of another brain.

After the swap, the person in the cobbler's body will remember having been a prince, and will remember the desire to try out life as a cobbler. He will say to himself: 'Finally, I have my chance!' He regards himself as being the prince, not the cobbler. And the person in the prince's body regards himself as being the cobbler, not the prince. Are they right?

The spatiotemporal continuity theory says that they are not right. Spatiotemporally continuous paths stick with *bodies*; they lead from the original prince to the person in the prince's body, and from the original cobbler to the person in the cobbler's body. So if the spatiotemporal continuity theory is correct, then the person in the cobbler's body is really the cobbler, not the prince, and the person in the prince's body is really the prince, not the cobbler.

Locke takes a different view; he agrees with the prince and the cobbler. If he is right, then his thought experiment refutes the spatiotemporal continuity theory. Here is a powerful argument on Locke's side. Suppose the prince had previously committed a horrible crime, knew that the mind-swap would occur, and hoped to use it to escape prosecution. After the swap, the crime is discovered, and the guards come to take the guilty one away. They know nothing of the swap, and so they haul off to jail the person in the prince's body, ignoring his protestations of

innocence. The person in the cobbler's body (who considers himself the prince) remembers committing the crime and gloats over his narrow escape. This is a miscarriage of justice! The gloating person in the cobbler's body ought to be punished. If so, then the person in the cobbler's body is the prince, not the cobbler, for a person ought to be punished only for what he himself did.

Psychological Continuity and the Problem of Duplication

Locke took the example of the prince and the cobbler to show that personal identity follows a different kind of continuity, **psychological continuity**. According to the new theory that Locke proposed, the **psychological continuity theory**, a past person is numerically identical to the future person, if any, who has that past person's memories, character traits, and so on—whether or not the future and past persons are spatiotemporally continuous with each other. Locke's theory says that the gloating person in the cobbler's body is indeed the prince and is therefore guilty of the prince's crimes, since he is psychologically continuous with the prince. As we saw, this seems to be the correct verdict. But Locke faces the following fascinating challenge, presented by the twentieth-century British philosopher Bernard Williams.