

# Personal Identity

Is that the same person?



# What is 'personal identity'?

- Personal identity is the familiar idea that a person is a long-lasting entity that exists through time.
- Remember Descartes' wax, that he believed to be the same *substance*, despite changes in its properties?
- A person is also (usually) considered to be a substance that remains the same over time, despite changes in size, maturity, personality, language spoken, employment, religion, political affiliations, etc.

“Everyone has a conviction of his own identity as far back as his memory reaches; this conviction doesn’t need help from philosophy to strengthen it, and no philosophy can weaken it without first producing some degree of insanity.”

Thomas Reid, *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man* (1785), Essay 3 (Memory).



# 'Numerical' identity (=)

- In general, identity is the relation that each thing bears to itself, and itself only. Thus A and B are identical just in case the set {A, B} has exactly one member.
- This is sometimes called *numerical* identity, perhaps because we first learn to use '=' in statements of arithmetic like  $2+3 = 5$ .
- ('Numerical' identity is a relation between concrete substances, not ideas.)

# Qualitative identity

- We often talk of ‘identity’ as something different from numerical identity.
- For example, we speak of identical twins, that you and I have the same car, and so on. But of course a pair of twins are *two* people, not one, and your car is not literally the same as mine. (Or we’d be sharing!)
- So philosophers call this other meaning of ‘identical’ *qualitative* identity. Two objects are qualitatively identical when they have the same list of properties, or qualities.

# Pop Quiz: Are they identical?



- They're (almost) *qualitatively* identical.

# Are they identical?



- They're *numerically* identical.

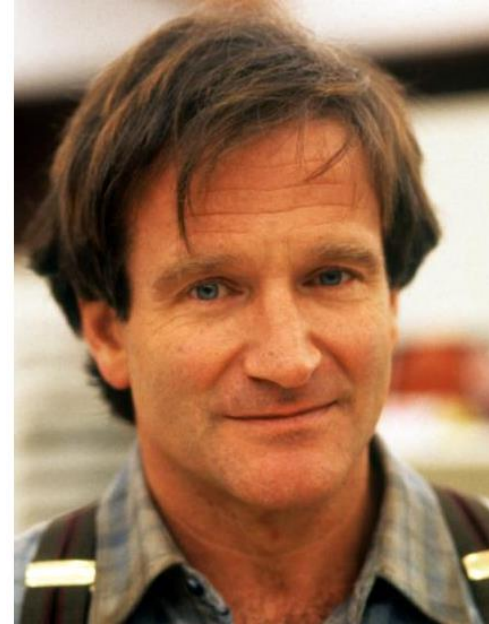
# Are they identical?



- They're (almost) *qualitatively* identical.



# Are they identical?



- They're *numerically* identical.

# Are they identical?



- One is Meryl Streep, the other Margaret Thatcher!

# Common sense – the “Ego Theory”

- When we talk of personal identity, common sense says we are talking about *numerical* identity, not qualitative identity.
- If a crime is committed, for example, then we want to punish the criminal. We want to punish *that very person*, not another person (if one exists) who happens to have similar properties.



Thomas Reid holds the ego theory

# Ego theory of persons

- The ego theory says that a person is a **substance**, a thing that persists through time and can have different properties at different times. Personal identity is simply numerical identity, and so cannot be defined in terms of any properties.

“... what explains the unity of a person’s whole life is the fact that all of the experiences in this life are had by the same person, or subject of experiences. In its best-known form, the *Cartesian view*, each person is a persisting purely mental thing—a soul, or spiritual substance.” (Derek Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons”.)

# Alternative to the Ego Theory

- What we think of as “personal identity” can be defined in terms of *properties*, e.g. memory, personality. But there are two versions of this:
  - That’s what personal identity is. (Locke)
  - Personal identity doesn’t exist (Bundle theory)

# Why care about personal identity?

- **Memory loss and personality change.** Is this really my husband, or it is instead someone else with his body? He doesn't even recognise me. Am I obliged to stay with him?
- **Moral and legal responsibility.** If I don't *remember* doing the crime, then was it actually *me*? Maybe it was just my body? How do we think about this?

# Why care about personal identity?

- **Life after death.** Can a person survive the death of their body, and continue to exist (perhaps in a new body)? What makes the resurrected person the *same one*, rather than just a good replica? Can one *look forward* to an afterlife? Will I live in a future paradise?
- **Science fiction.** Suppose a transporter beam (from Star Trek) gets split, so that two Commander Rikers are produced. Which one is actually Riker? Or are they *both* Riker?



# Philosophers challenge the common sense view

- There aren't too many philosophers who agree with common sense about personal identity, even though ...

“... no philosophy can weaken it without first producing some degree of insanity.” (Reid)



- Philosophers often reject personal identity on the grounds that it is incompatible with other beliefs they hold, especially:
  - Empiricism
  - Physicalism
- In other words, belief in personal identity often coincides with acceptance of rationalism and dualism.

## Part 2

David Hume: Personal identity is a *fiction*

# David Hume



- In *A Treatise of Human Nature* (1739) Hume applies his empiricist approach to the question of personal identity.
- According to Hume, all of our ideas (concepts) are copies of sense impressions. (None are innate.)
- We do not *experience* identity over time. We are not “intimately conscious of what we call our Self”. We do not “feel its existence and continuance in existence”.
- Is Hume right?

# What do we experience?

- What do we experience then, if not a continued Self?
- We experience a succession of impressions (sensations), pain, pleasure, grief, joy, sense perceptions, etc.
- These sensations “succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement.” Nothing is “invariable and uninterrupted”.

- Hence we don't even have a **concept** of personal identity!

“It cannot, therefore, be from any of these impressions, or from any other, that the idea of self is derived; and consequently there is no such idea”

The claim that the self exists over time is **meaningless** rather than false.

# Personal identity as a “fiction”

- Many situations involve a succession of objects that are related by “resemblance, contiguity, or causation”.
  - *Resemblance*: they have similar properties
  - *Contiguity*: they “touch” each other in space and time
  - *Causation*: the later objects arise out of the earlier objects
- In such situations the *imagination* often creates a single object out of the succession, as if the succession really consists of just one object that undergoes changes.

E.g.

“A man, who hears a noise, that is frequently interrupted and renewed, says, it is still the same noise; though ‘tis evident the sounds have only a specific identity or resemblance, and there is nothing numerically the same ...”

(p. 366) N.B. ‘specific identity’ = qualitative identity

# E.g. The Ship of Theseus

- Hume points out, for example, that we talk as if a ship persists over many decades, even if all the matter that the ship is composed of is gradually replaced over that time. The “identity” of the ship over time is a mistake, a fiction.
- The same is true of people. There really is no “mysterious and inexplicable” thing that is “invariable and uninterrupted”.





- Hume assumes that, for material objects, complete identity would require being exactly the same matter.
- E.g. of plants, he says: “An oak, that grows from a small plant to a large tree, is still [regarded as] the same oak, though there be not one particle of matter, or figure of its parts the same”



# Personal identity as a “fiction”

“The line of reasoning that has so successfully explained the identity of plants and animals, of ships and houses, and of all changing complex things—natural and artificial—must be applied to personal identity too. **The identity that we ascribe to the mind of man is fictitious**; it is like the identity we ascribe to plants and animals. So it can’t have a different origin from the latter, but must come from a similar operation of the imagination on similar objects.”

- How shocking, or threatening, is Hume's scepticism about persons?
- If accepted, would it make much difference to your life?
- Should you still look forward to (or dread) the future?

# Reid's response

- Reid agrees with Hume about the 'identity' of material objects being fictional.

“Thus, the identity that we ascribe to bodies—whether natural or artificial—isn't perfect identity; it is rather something which for convenience of speech we *call* identity”.

Yet Reid thinks that the identity of *persons* (which are not material bodies) is 'real' and 'perfect', not a matter of degree.

# Personal identity and physicalism

- Reid, being a substance dualist, is able to maintain that personal identity is real, perfect and all-or-nothing.
- The person is the soul, a substance that (unlike a material object) is both constant and indivisible.
- So Reid never has to face questions about what happens when you lose part of your substance, etc.

# Personal identity and physicalism

- Physicalists, on the other hand, think that persons are their bodies: collections of particles (atoms and molecules).
- These particles are constantly entering and leaving the body. Over a few years, all the particles in the body are renewed.
- What then is ‘invariable and uninterrupted’? Not any *substance*.

- The only thing that is (relatively) constant is the pattern, or structure, of the person. Somehow this pattern holds memories, one's personality, etc. and (usually) changes only slowly.
- But these things are *properties* of a person, not the substance!
- It seems that physicalism leads to the claim that persons are collections of properties, or “patterns of information”, rather than substances (or to the claim that persons don't exist).



# Ray Kurzweil: physicalism and identity





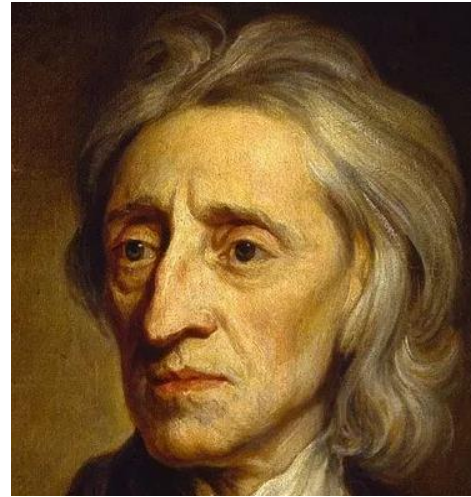
# Substance or properties?

- Many philosophers (including Hume, Locke, and most physicalists) see whatever there is to personal identity in terms of **properties** rather than substance.
  - But is this really “identity”? It isn’t *numerical* identity.
- Some of these philosophers (e.g. Hume) are analogous to hard determinists, saying that personal identity is an illusion (or imaginary, or a fiction).
- Others (e.g. Locke) are similar to compatibilists, saying that an identity defined by properties is all we need.

# Part 3

Locke and the memory theory

# John Locke



- Locke discusses personal identity in “Of Ideas of Identity and Diversity”. (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter 27 – p. 361 in *Pojman*)
- Locke’s first claim is that personal identity doesn’t require sameness of *substance*.
  - One argument for this is that, if you lose a hand or leg, then you remain the same person.)

# John Locke

- Locke assumes that atoms are substances that exist for long periods, perhaps eternally.
- But what about (e.g.) plants, which are constantly losing atoms and gaining new ones? Is it the same plant?

“... something is one plant if it has an organization of parts in one cohering body **partaking of one common life**, and it continues to be the same plant as long as it partakes of the same life, even if that life is passed along to new particles of matter vitally united to the living plant, in a similar continued organization suitable for that sort of plants.”

(Essay II, Ch. 27, Sec. 4.) And Locke takes a similar view for the identity of animals.

# “same man” vs. “same person”

- Locke thinks that (in principle at least) two humans can be the “same man”, but not the “same person” (and vice-versa).
- The “same man” relation is defined, as with plants and animals, in terms of “a participation in the same continued life”

# Why not appeal to immaterial souls?

“Reflect on yourself, and conclude that you have in yourself an immaterial spirit that is what thinks in you, keeps you the same throughout the constant change of your body, and is what you call ‘myself’. Now try to suppose also that it is the same soul that was in Nestor or Thersites at the siege of Troy. This isn’t obviously absurd; for souls, as far as we know anything of their nature, can go with any portion of matter as well as with any other; so the soul or thinking substance that is now yourself may once really have been the soul of someone else, such as Thersites or Nestor. ...

... But you don't now have any consciousness of any of the actions either of those two; **so can you conceive yourself as being the same person with either of them?** Can their actions have anything to do with you? Can you attribute those actions to yourself, or think of them as yours more than the actions of any other men that ever existed? **Of course you can't ..."**



# ‘Identity’ has various meanings

“So unity of substance does not constitute all sorts of identity. To conceive and judge correctly about identity, we must consider what idea the word it is applied to stands for: it is one thing to be the same substance, another the same man, and a third the same person”

# What is a person?

- A *person* is essentially a **thinking, conscious being**, Locke says. Hence:  
“in this alone consists personal identity, i.e. the sameness of a rational being; and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards to any past action or thought, so far reaches the identity of that person; it is the same self now that it was then; and this present self that now reflects on it is the one by which that action was performed.”

- Locke seems to consider remembering something as **being conscious of events in the past** (one's own past, I guess).
- If one remembers some experience, then one is conscious of it.
- Consciousness, the defining characteristic of persons, thus ties this past experience to one's present self, *making* it an experience of the same person.

- Locke thinks that (in theory) a single consciousness might pass from substance to substance, but it's always the same person.

“What makes a man be himself to himself is sameness of consciousness, so personal identity depends entirely on that—whether the consciousness is tied to one substance throughout or rather is continued in a series of different substances.”

# What about memory loss?

- Locke considers a case where a person (say Fred) cannot remember a certain time interval of their past. (Say last Wednesday.)
- In that case, the person who had Fred's body last Wednesday wasn't Fred, but someone else! (Same *body*, but a different *person*.)
- What do you think of that?

- It may be objected: ‘Suppose I wholly lose the memory of some parts of my life beyond any possibility of retrieving them, so that I shall never be conscious of them again; aren’t I still the same person who did those actions, had those thoughts that I once was conscious of, even though I have now forgotten them?’  
(Section 20)
- *No*, says Locke.

“If one man could have distinct disconnected consciousnesses at different times, that same man would certainly make different persons at different times. ... human laws don’t punish the madman for the sane man’s actions, or the sane man for what the madman did, because they treat them as two persons. This is reflected in common speech when we say that someone is ‘not himself’ or is ‘beside himself’. Those phrases insinuate that the speaker thinks—or that those who coined the phrases thought—that the self was changed, the self-same person was no longer in that man.”

- Is that a good argument?
- (Isn’t insanity different from (later) memory loss?)

# The Pill of Innocence

- One idea I have is to market a pill that causes you to lose your memory of the past 12 hours. Keep one in your pocket.
- If you happen to commit a crime, take the pill within a few hours.
- Then you won't be able to remember committing the crime, and hence *you didn't do it*. It was *your body*, but not *you*, the person!
- N.B. if you (I mean the other guy) robbed a bank, you might still have to give the money back, if you're caught. But at least you won't go to jail.



# The Resurrection

- Locke can easily explain how a person can be raised from the dead. All the resurrected body needs are the memories of the old body, and it's the same person.
- “So we can easily conceive of being the same person at the resurrection, though in a body with partly different parts or structure from what one has now, as long as the same consciousness stays with the soul that inhabits the body.”

# Brain Scan Resurrection

“Suppose that the following is going to happen to me. When I die in a normal way, scientists are going to map the states of all the cells in my brain and body and after a few months they will have constructed a perfect duplicate of me out of organic matter. And this duplicate will wake up fully psychologically continuous with me, seeming to remember my life with my character, etc.”

Parfit, “Brain Transplants and Personal Identity”, (Reading #19), p. 7.

- Would that duplicate body, possessing your memories and character, be *you*? (Can you look forward to a future life in that body?)
- But isn't there a distinction between *real* and *apparent* (i.e. fake) memories?
- Can Locke make this distinction in the right way?

# e.g. The Obsessed Historian

- Imagine a historian becomes obsessed with the life of Napoleon. He reads every extant document relating to Napoleon, including hundreds of personal letters written by or to Napoleon.
- Then he goes a little crazy, and starts to believe he *is* Napoleon. His knowledge of Napoleon somehow gets transformed into (apparent) memories. Instead of “Napoleon committed a tactical error at the Battle of Waterloo”, he now thinks, “I messed up at Waterloo. *Mordieu!*”

# What is a “real” memory?

- E.g. “My memory of event E is real” might include the condition that *E really happened to me*.
- But then we’re using personal identity to define what a “real” memory is.
- (This would be circular for Locke!)

# Memory and causation

- *A real memory is just one that is caused by the event?*
- But what if the causal process is highly *unusual*?
- (E.g. the crazy historian who studies Napoleon, and ends up thinking he *is* Napoleon!)

- These ‘memories’ *were* caused by the real events at Waterloo in 1815, but in a rather unusual, indirect way.
- Perhaps a real memory must not only be caused by the event, but *in the right way*?
- What about the memories of a resurrected person, however? Their causation is also unusual, the causal chain passing through God, or through brain scanners and digital file storage.

# Reid on the memory criterion

“What makes it the case that I was the person who did such-and-such is not my remembering doing it. My remembering doing it makes me know for sure that I did it; but I could have done it without remembering it. The relation to me that is expressed by saying ‘I did it’ would be the same even if I hadn’t the least memory of doing it.”

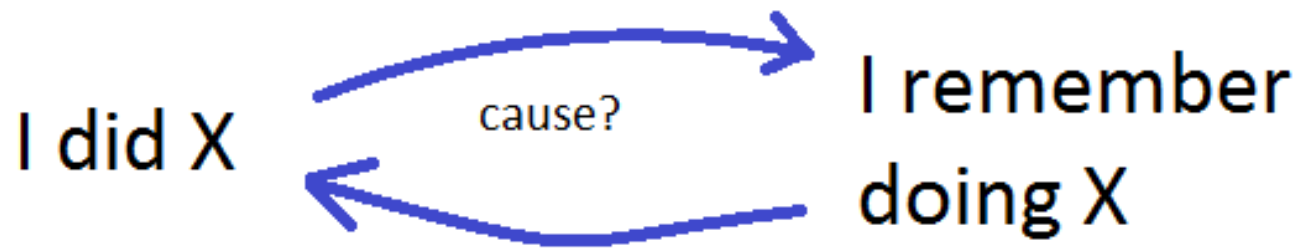




“This thesis:

*My remembering that I did such-and-such makes it the case that I did do it* seems to me as great an absurdity as this:  
My believing that the world was created makes it the case that it was created!

The point I’m making in this paragraph would have been unnecessary if some great philosophers hadn’t contradicted it.”



# Part 4

Bundle Theory vs. Ego Theory

# Ego theory

- Locke's view is usually described as giving a "criterion" for personal identity, specifically a "memory criterion".
- But, according to some, identity is a *primitive* (or basic, or simple) relation, holding between each thing and itself. One cannot give "criteria" for it.
- Richard Swinburne calls this view the 'ego theory'.



- Reid accepts the ego theory.
- So Reid disagrees with Locke on the relation between memory and personal identity. Memory is *evidence* of personal identity, but doesn't *constitute* personal identity.

“If you ask for a definition of identity, I confess that I can't give one; it is too simple a notion to admit of logical definition.”

# The Problem of Duplication

- A problem that afflicts any ‘property’ theory of personal identity, including Locke’s it seems, is the **problem of duplication**.
- God is going to ‘raise me from the dead’ by creating a new body with my memories. If God can create *one* new body with my memories, then why not *two*? (Or a dozen?)
- Of course these future people cannot all be me, so it looks as if none of them are. (Identity is transitive.) They’re just replicas, perhaps.

# Derek Parfit: the Bundle Theory



- Like Hume, Parfit thinks that personal *identity* is a fiction. The relation between a person and their future ‘selves’ is merely **causation** and **continuity** of properties.
- He calls this the ‘bundle theory’. A person is no more than a bundle of *properties*.

# Parfit: the Bundle Theory

- Parfit thinks, for example, that there's no real difference between a case where you exist in the future, and a case where someone exactly like you exists in the future.
- There is no “further fact” about whether it *is* you.

“You do not merely want there to be psychological continuity between you and some future person. You want to *be* this future person. On the Bundle Theory, **there is no such special further fact**. What you fear will not happen, in this imagined case, *never* happens.”

(Parfit, “Divided Minds and the Nature of Persons”.)

# Similar to Buddhist texts

“A sentient being does exist, you think, O Mara? You are misled by a false conception. This bundle of elements is void of Self. In it there is no sentient being. Just as a set of wooden parts receives the name of carriage, so do we give to elements the name of fancied being.”

“Buddha has spoken thus: ‘O Brethren, actions do exist, and also their consequences, but the person that acts does not. There is no one to cast away this set of elements, and no one to assume a new set of them. There exists no Individual, it is only a conventional name given to a set of elements.’ ”



# Transporter beams, etc.

- There are similar worries about science fiction cases like the “Star Trek” teleporter.
- Does the teleport beam carry your *substance*, or just information about your properties?

If it's just information, which is used to build a new body at the destination, then couldn't two replicas be made?



# *A Tale of Two Rikers*

# Teletransporter case

- A nice way to find out whether you hold the ego or bundle theory is to consider the teletransporter.
- “Several writers claim that, if you chose to be teletransported, believing this to be the fastest way of travelling, you would be making a terrible mistake. This would not be a way of travelling, but a way of dying.”  
(Parfit)
- **Question:** Would the person who arrives at the other end be *you*, or just a *replica*?

# Teletransporter case

- According to the bundle theory, *there is no difference at all* between you arriving on Mars, and a replica of you arriving there.
- “You do not merely want there to be psychological continuity between you and some future person. You want to *be* this future person. On the Bundle Theory, **there is no such special further fact**. What you fear will not happen, in this imagined case, *never* happens.”