

Personal Identity, Part IA: Metaphysics.

Lecture One, *Introduction to Personal Identity*, 5th October

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1. Introduction

1.1. There are a variety of philosophical issues connected to personal identity and they arise for a number of distinct reasons. It's helpful to first consider some cases:

(1) A Strange Legal Defence Ted is accused of a crime and decides to defend himself with a strange argument. Ted concedes that he is very similar to the culprit (even the same fingerprints!), but the culprit cannot be Ted: the culprit had an appendix, Ted doesn't; the culprit was 25 years old, Ted is 30.

* One is legally responsible for crimes one commits. Ted and the culprit must be the *same person*.

(2) An Ethical Company! A company is building a dam. It requires utterly destroying the contents of one of two valleys. Valley A contains only rocks. Valley B contains a small village. One valley must be destroyed. The right thing to do is destroy the valley containing rocks.

* Some entities in Valley B are *persons*. There are no people in Valley A.

* How we act towards persons weighs more heavily in our moral reasoning.

(3a) Difficult Decisions I: Ella knows that smoking is bad for her health and affects the health of those around her. She only care about herself. She decides to quit smoking and endure the negative side effects now, because the consequences she faces later are much likely worse.

(3b) Difficult Decisions II: Bella agrees with Ella that smoking is bad, the later consequences are worse than the earlier consequences of quitting, and she similarly only cares about herself. She doesn't quit: the consequences are far enough in the future to not be *her* problem.

* The only difference between (3a) and (3b) is that Ella and Bella disagree over *who* faces the future consequences. Ella selfishly decides to quit. Bella selfishly decides to not quit.

2. Questions about Personal Identity

2.1. At the heart of (1): is Ted the same person as the culprit? More generally, under what conditions is one person at one time identical to another person at another time. Otherwise known as:

Reidentification: What is to for something to be the same person over time?

This is also at the heart of (3a) and (3b). (2) raises a different question: what is it to be a person? Relatedly, do certain non-human animals qualify as people? What about foetuses? This is known as:

Identification: What is it for something to be a person?

2.2. There are other philosophically interesting questions about personal identity (Olson, 2002: §15.1).

Evidence: What evidence is relevant to claims of personal identity?

Counting: How many persons are there?

What Matters: Is it personal identity through time that matters, or something else?

Modal: How different could I be (and still be me)?

3. Clarifying the Questions.

3.1. We focus on the reidentification and to some extent the identification question. *Reidentification* is about survival: under what conditions does a person *survive* from one moment to the next. Identification is just about the conditions something is or is not a person at a given time. Some further clarifications:

3.2. **Non-Epistemological:** Neither question asks how we *know* whether something is a person, or we *know* whether this is the same person. What are conditions under which something is a/the same person.

3.3. **Metaphysical Personhood:** Both questions concern *metaphysical* personhood not *legal* or *moral* personhood. To be a legal person is to be subject to legal rights and obligations. A moral person is something which is part of the moral community—deserving of moral consideration.

3.4. **Numerical vs. Qualitative Identity:** It's important to distinguish numerical from qualitative identity.

Qualitative Identity: Entities x and y are *qualitatively identical* if they share some specified properties. In which case, they are identical with respect to those properties.

Numerical Identity: Entities x and y are *numerically identical* if x and y are one and the same thing. No two distinct entities are numerically identical. Numerical identity, in contrast to qualitative identity, is governed by Leibniz's Law: If $x = y$, then any property had by x is had by y and *vice versa*.

Reidentification concerns numerical identity: what is to for a person to be numerically identical over time?

4. Criteria for Personal Identity

4.1. Reidentification is often answered with *criteria* for personal identity. The identity criteria for some kind of objects are the necessary and sufficient conditions for x to be identical to y , where x and y are entities of the right kind, see (Locke, 1689: II, xxvii, §7). Here's a good example criteria for *inert* objects:

Identity of Material Constitution (IMC): Entities x and y are identical if and only if the elements which compose x and y are identical.

4.2. (IMC) works well for, e.g., molecules or lumps of coal, but it is difficult to use (IMC) to answer questions about the identity of other kinds, e.g., organic entities, see (Locke, 1689: II, xxvii, §4). Think about our bodies. Material constitution is not necessary: we replace our parts at an alarmingly fast rate. Nor is it sufficient: our 'lost' atoms could go on to constitute a new body, but this would not be identical to our body.

4.3. Broadly speaking, there are three sorts of criteria. Our continued existence is matter of:

Physical: Some relation of physical continuity holding, e.g., bodily, or biological continuity.

Psychological: Some appropriate psychological relation holding, e.g., continuity of memory.

Some Further Thing: The continued existence of some special entity, e.g., ego or soul.

References

Locke, John (1689). *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*.

Olson, Eric T. (2002). Personal Identity. In: *Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Mind*. Ed. by Stich and Warfield.