

10. Personal Identity and the Body

"When I say 'I am in pain', I do not point to a person who is in pain, since in a certain sense I have no idea *who* is." And this can be given a justification. For the main point is: I did not say that such-and-such a person was in pain, but "I am....." Now in saying this I don't name any person. Just as I don't name anyone when I *groan* with pain. Though someone else sees who is in pain from the groaning.

What does it mean to know *who* is in pain? It means, for example, to know which man in this room is in pain: for instance, that it is the one who is sitting over there, or the one who is standing in that corner, the tall one over there with the fair hair, and so on.--What am I getting at? At the fact that there is a great variety of criteria for personal '*identity*'.

Now which of them determines my saying that 'I' am in pain?
None.¹

While I am not certain what to make of everything that Wittgenstein says in this passage, there are, I believe, important lessons to be learned from it. Consider first the statement in quotation marks with which it opens. While it is clear, I think, that Wittgenstein believes there is something right in this remark, we should not assume that he takes it, just as it stands, to be straightforwardly correct. Consider this portion of the remark: "When I say 'I am in pain', in a certain sense I have no idea *who* is". What do you think we should make of that?

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While a first reaction might be to dismiss it as simply absurd, I hope that the discussion of the previous section has made you hesitant about that first reaction. For there is, I think, a truth that is, at any rate, close to this. Thus, consider this: "If *all* I can say about who is in pain is that 'I am in pain', there is a certain sense in which I have no idea *who* is". Suppose that, on first recovering from a coma, I am in a state of dreadful confusion: I cannot tell you my name, I cannot tell you anything about my past, I cannot tell you where I am, I cannot tell you the colour of my hair or any other of my distinctive characteristics. Yet, when the nurse asks how I am feeling, I can say, straight off, 'I am in pain'. There is a sense there in which, while others may know who is in pain, I do not. Just as there is a sense in which, if *all* I can say about where I am is 'Here', I have no idea *where* I am. The remark that Wittgenstein places in quotation marks seems to imply that such a state of total confusion is the condition of all of us all of the time; but if we set that suggestion to one side, we can see that there is something right here.

In the second paragraph of the passage above Wittgenstein asks 'What does it mean to know *who* is in pain?', and says that what he is getting at with the examples he offers is that 'there is a great variety of criteria for person "*identity*"'. Suppose that, entering a ward in which she has been told that there is a man in extreme pain, the doctor, seeing

¹ Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 404

the contorted features of one of the patients, says 'I know who is in pain'. When asked who is in pain, she replies: 'The man in the bed in the corner'. But now suppose that, while she knows that it is the man in the bed in the corner who is in pain, she has no idea *who* that man is: she does not know that he is David Williams, father of Jim and Dorothy, captain of Lampeter rugby football team, the man who donated a large sum of money to the hospital a few years ago, and so on. Does she know who is in pain? In the sense that is of immediate importance to her work as a doctor the answer is simply: yes. But that is consistent with acknowledging that there are other senses in which the answer is: no. (Suppose that a lawyer asks me: 'Do you know who you are married to?' Absurd question! Well, possibly not. Suppose the answer – the one that interests him – is: 'The great-great-granddaughter of the wealthiest man in Ireland in the 1880s'.)

While I am not completely certain here, I take this to be Wittgenstein's point, or close to it, when he suggests that 'there is a great variety of criteria for personal "*identity*". And as he remarks, *none* of these senses in which someone may know who is in pain come into play when I announce that 'I' am in pain.²

I gave the following examples of possible answers to the question of who a particular man is: he is David Williams, captain of Lampeter rugby football team, father of Jim and Dorothy, the man who donated a large sum of money to the hospital a few years ago, and so on. Each of these answers involves our identifying the person in front of us as *the same* person as one who underwent, or did, a certain thing in the past. The first, for example, involves the idea that this is one and the same person as the baby that was christened 'David Williams' all of those years ago and has been known by that name ever since.³ The idea of this being 'the same person' as one identified earlier – the idea, as it is sometimes put, of 'personal identity' – is one that is of enormous importance in our lives. It is important to praise and blame, and to reward and punishment: punishment is only justified if he is the man who (is the same man as the one who) committed the crime. The idea of this being 'the same person' is, I believe⁴, fundamental to love and friendship: for example, my special feelings for *this* child are closely bound up with the thought that she is Dorothy, my daughter, whom I have watched developing over the past five years. It is important in my thought about *myself* through the pride or shame that I feel about something that I have done, through my sense of identity and locatedness in the world, through the special feelings of fear or joyful anticipation that I have when I reflect that the bad or good thing that is about to happen is about to happen to *me*, and so on. Before reading on, you might pause to reflect on these, and other, examples of the central importance in our lives of the idea of 'being the same person'.

² Suppose that someone replies: 'Fine. None of *those* senses of "knowing who is in pain" come into play when I announce that "I" am in pain. That is not to say that, if all I know about who is in pain is that I am, there is *no* sense in which I know who is in pain'. We might reply: 'Say if you want that there is a sense in which I would, in this case, know who is in pain. But remember that the "sense" is the same as that in which someone who can say nothing about where he is other than "I am here" knows where he is'.

³ Actually, as perhaps you can see, that will not quite do as a statement of what is involved in the claim that this is David Williams. But so long as it is along the right very general lines it can serve to bring out the point I am after here.

⁴ There is a sense in which this claim is not totally uncontroversial. I am hoping, however, to convince you that it is true.

The idea of sameness

The central question of this section is this: what kind of connection must there be between an individual at one time and an individual at a later time if we are to say that the later individual is the *same person* as the earlier one? Within philosophical discussion of the self, this is a context in which the prejudice against the body takes a particularly powerful form. As we will see, the body has, in this connection, quite widely been ignored totally: the discussion being carried on for all the world as if we were not bodily creatures at all. And in response to more recent discussions in which our bodily nature has been given some place, it has been suggested that to give the body a central place in discussions of our identity over time is wholly destructive of everything that is of value in our thought about, and relations with, each other. A central task of this section will be to consider the legitimacy of this charge.

In approaching this issue it will be helpful first to think a bit about some unambiguously bodily things: for example, tables, boats and trees. I would like you, then, to forget about people for a moment and to consider what is involved in saying, for example, that this – a table at which I am pointing – is the same table as the one that was here last week.

Now a first point to note here is a feature of our language that may cause serious confusion in this discussion. I may say 'This is the same table as the one that was here last week'; and I may say 'This table is the same as the one that was here last week'. Before you read on I would like you to consider the question: Do these two remarks mean the same thing? Make a note of your answer to this question.

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Well, I think the answer is: not necessarily. It may be that the second remark is ambiguous, but a possible – I think the most natural – way to read it will take it as meaning something quite different from the first statement. On this reading, the second statement could be true even though the table here now is not the same table as that which was here last week. For what the second statement says is that this table *has just the same qualities* as the one that was here last week: same height, same colour, and so on. And that could be so (or so we normally suppose) even though it is a different table: perhaps another one produced by the same company. Now you might say: 'No two tables are ever exactly alike in all their qualities.' But while that may be true it does not alter the fact that there are two quite different notions of 'sameness' to be distinguished here. To see this, we can consider the other side of the point I have just made. This is the fact that it is possible for the first statement to be true while the second is false. Thus, this could be the very same table as the one that was here last week, even though it has changed: perhaps it has been painted, or the legs have been shortened.

We could say, then, that our language contains two notions of 'sameness': two notions of 'identity'. We could speak of one – the first – as *numerical* identity: the table that was here last week and that which is here today are one and the same table. And we could speak of the other as *qualitative* identity: the table that was here last week has just the same qualities as that which is here today.

A second general suggestion about sameness that I would like to make here is this. For most things, what is crucial to being the *same* one from one day to the next is 'spatio-temporal continuity': or, as we might equally put it, 'physical' or 'bodily' continuity. This is the same table as the one that was here last week if and only if the table before me now is connected with the one that was here last week through a physically continuous path in space and time. As we might illustrate this: if I sat down in front of the table last week and, following it wherever it was moved, did not let it out of my sight, I would find myself at the end of the week looking at the table that is here. Conversely, if it is simply impossible that the table that was in New York three hours ago could have travelled through space to Lampeter between then and now, then this table here in Lampeter now is certainly not the same table as the one that was in New York three hours ago.

I said: 'what is crucial to being the *same* one from one day to the next is spatio-temporal continuity'. It is important here to draw a clear distinction between what is crucial to *being* the same table and what is merely *evidence* that this is the same table. Suppose that I used to own a rather unusual table, built to my own design, and which had some very distinctive scratches on one of its legs. The table was stolen, but several years later a table of exactly the same design and with exactly the same scratches on it turns up in an auction. The fact that this table in the auction is, in these respects, indistinguishable from the one that I used to own is very good *evidence* that it is the very same table. But it is not what is, in itself, crucial to *its being* the same table. However unlikely it may be in practice, it makes sense to suppose that there could be another table with exactly the same features as that which I used to own; and conversely, it could be that a table in the auction with features substantially different from those that my old table had is, in fact, the very same table: someone has sandpapered and varnished it in the mean time. As I suggested before, what is crucial to its being the same table is the fact that this table before us now is spatio-temporally continuous with the one that I used to own. Since, in this case, we did not keep physical track of the table over the period of three years we are not in the best possible position for judging it to be the same table; so we have to make do with something less than conclusive grounds for our judgement: we have to make do with evidence.

There is one more general point about sameness that I want to make here. Consider a growing tree. I point to a substantial oak in the garden and say: 'We planted this tree thirty years ago'. I say: 'We planted *this* tree'. That is to say: the tree that we planted is the very same tree as the one that is standing here now. Yet the tree before us now has very different features from the one that we planted 30 years ago; and what is more, it is not at all composed of the same collection of molecules as the small sapling that occupied this spot back then. How then, we might ask, *can* it be the same tree? Before reading on, make a note of any thoughts that occur to you in response to this question.

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A first thing that you might have said in response is that we must distinguish here between qualitative and numerical identity. The fact that the tree has changed its features - the fact that it is *qualitatively* quite different from the tree that was here 30 years ago - is quite consistent with the suggestion that it is the very same tree. Now some

philosophers have had doubts about that. But on the face of it those doubts could only spring from a confusing of the two different notions of 'sameness'.

Still, there is another complication in this case: another factor that has led some to doubt whether it can really be correct to say that this is the same tree as the one that was here 30 years ago. This is the fact that the tree before us now is composed of a quite different collection of particles from the tree that was here 30 years ago. Shouldn't that lead us to hesitate over saying it is the same tree? Well, should it? Might we not simply reply: 'Certainly the tree has developed over the last 30 years: there has been a constant transfer of particles between the tree and its environment. But what we mean when we say it is the same tree as the one that was here 30 years ago is that it is physically - spatio-temporally - continuous with the one that was here 30 years ago. And that condition is clearly satisfied.'

While that has not seemed a good reply to all philosophers, it does seem so to me. I must leave you to decide for yourself what you make of it.

Sameness of people

Let us return now to sameness *of people*. Many are inclined to think that what is crucial to being the same *person* is obviously quite different from what is crucial to being the same table or tree. As I have said, it is a striking feature of the literature on this topic that in much of it our bodily nature makes no appearance at all; and that, where it does, it is often dismissed as so obviously irrelevant as not to be worthy of serious discussion.

If we do not wish to assume from the start that the body does not have a proper place in this discussion, we may be tempted to draw a distinction between, on the one hand, views according to which it is 'having the same body' that is crucial to being the same person, and, on the other hand, views according to which it is 'having the same mind' that has this role. There may, however, be dangers in expressing the matter in this way. In particular, the phrase 'having the same mind' may fail to mark some fundamental differences between different views. An important aspect of the philosophical work that needs to be done here is distinguishing these different views, and seeing if any of them stands up to close scrutiny. We will be considering in some detail three such views: views, that is, according to which it is, as we might put it, 'the mind', not 'the body', that is crucial to being the same person. I will call these: (i) the simple soul view, (ii) the memory view, and (iii) the psychological continuity view. You may well be inclined towards a view that is rather different from any of these. If you are, you should ask yourself whether any of the objections that I raise to each of these views might apply also to your view.

(i) The simple soul view

On the view that I am calling 'the simple soul view' what I essentially am is a simple, immaterial, soul - or 'mind' - which, while at present lodged in this body, is quite distinct from it, and so is capable of existing without it. It is the survival of this simple, immaterial entity that is crucial to *my* survival. On this view, the essential person - the soul - has psychological characteristics: these are features of the soul in a sense roughly analogous to that in which its colour, shape and weight are features of the table. Thus, just as the table can change its colour and shape (at least to some extent) and still be the same table, so the soul can change its psychological features and still be the same soul.

Again, just as there can, at least in theory, be two distinct tables with exactly the same colour, shape and weight, so there can, at least in theory, be two distinct souls with exactly the same psychological characteristics.

What makes me the person I am, then, is the fact that I have the soul that I do. In practice, at least so far as we know, an individual soul stays connected with one body throughout the life of that body. But there is no difficulty in principle with the idea that a soul could move from one body to another; and no difficulty in principle with the idea that my soul - that is *I* - could survive the destruction of my body.

This view is, of course, that which is to be found in Descartes, and that which Wittgenstein characterizes in terms of the idea that the self is 'something bodiless, which, however, has its seat in our body'. Wittgenstein, as we have seen, attempts to locate, and undermine, something that may tempt us towards a view of this kind. I want now to consider directly a possible difficulty, not with the reasoning that may lead us to the view, but with the view itself. (The difficulty, you will notice, is closely linked with one discussed earlier in relation to our knowledge of the minds of others.)

In practice we often think we know who a particular person is: in the sense, for example, that it does not cross my mind to doubt that the person I see in the cafe every day is the very same person - James - who I have met many times in the past. What is the relevance of this observation to the view we are now considering? Make a note of any thoughts you have on this.

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The point that I hoped you might make is this: if we accept this account of what is crucial to being the same person, could we ever be justified in any of our views about who anyone is? After all, it is insisted that a soul is a *non-bodily* entity: and that implies, I take it, that it is not the kind of thing that can be seen or touched. So what grounds could I have for thinking that the same soul as yesterday inhabits this body that I see in front of me? What grounds can I have for rejecting the suggestion that a new soul, with very similar - or even identical - psychological characteristics, has moved into this body?

I should stress that I am not, with these questions, suggesting that we *don't* ever know that this is the same person as we met before. The point is rather this: if we accept this - the 'simple soul' - view of what is crucial to being the same person won't we have to admit that we don't know? The argument, then, is: if we want to insist that we obviously *do* know who some of the people around us are, then we must reject this account of what is crucial to being the same person over time.⁵

There is a possible response to this line of argument. Someone might say: 'At least I know in my own case that the same soul has inhabited this body for all of its life; so it is reasonable for me to suppose that the same is true with other bodies. And so I *can* after all have good grounds for my judgements about who people are: recognising their bodies

⁵ I should, perhaps, also stress that what I am offering is not a general attack on the idea of a 'soul'. I am, rather, raising a worry for *this* way of thinking of what a soul is. There may well be other ways of thinking of 'the soul' that do not face this objection.

I can reasonably assume that these contain the appropriate souls.' Do you find this a promising line of argument?

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I don't. The argument seems simply to ignore the difficulties raised by the assumption that the soul is a 'non-bodily' entity: an entity that cannot be seen or touched. Given this assumption, how can I know, even in my own case, that there has not been a change of soul in this - my - body at some stage in its life? If at some point a fresh soul, with just the same memories and so on, took over my body would I ever know? Would I know - would I even suspect - if a fresh, but indistinguishable, soul took over my body every day?

This is roughly analogous to a case in which someone replaces my car engine with another that is indistinguishable from it. It is analogous, that is, except for the fact that, since one can see and touch car engines, I could, in principle, catch him in the act. The trouble with the 'soul' - as this is understood on the view we are now considering - is that since it cannot be seen or touched it seems that we could never have any grounds for any beliefs about how they move around. So if what we meant when we said 'This is the same person as the one I met yesterday' was 'This body is inhabited by the same immaterial soul as inhabited the body I encountered yesterday' we could never have any grounds for any of our beliefs about who anyone is. That seems a good reason to avoid this account if we possibly can.

(ii) *The memory view*

John Locke, an English philosopher who was born in 1632 and died in 1704, offers a groundbreaking discussion of the identity of a person: one to which all later discussions are indebted. I want you now to read the chapter of his book *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* in which he discusses this issue: Book Two, chapter xxvii. I hope that some of it will seem familiar to you: I have already made use of some of the ideas that he presents. Don't worry if you can't follow everything that he says. But while reading this chapter I would like you to make a note, however brief, of your answers to the following questions:

- (a) What is the significance of the distinction Locke draws between the 'identity of *man*' and '*personal* identity'?
- (b) Why does Locke think that having the same soul (the same 'immaterial spirit') is clearly not what is crucial to being the same person?
- (c) What does Locke think is crucial to being the same person?

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Locke was inclined to accept the general Cartesian view of a person: he was, that is, inclined to accept that a live human being is composed of a material body linked with a non-material 'mind' or 'soul'. He was also convinced that there is a crucial distinction between what he calls, on the one hand, the 'identity of *man*', and, on the other, '*personal* identity'. He was, that is, convinced that it is one thing to say that the individual before me is the same *man* - or, as I will express it, the same *human being* - as I met last week,

and quite another to say that it is the same *person* as I met last week. For he was convinced that we can envisage circumstances in which it would obviously be correct to say that a person had moved from one to another living human body:

For should the soul of a prince, carrying with it the consciousness of the prince's past life, enter and inform the body of a cobbler, as soon as deserted by his own soul, everyone sees he would be the same *person* with the prince, accountable only for the prince's actions.⁶

The force of the claim that this is the 'same person' as the prince - that this person *is* the prince - is illustrated by the last clause of the quotation from Locke: this person is accountable only for the prince's actions. Despite the fact that this individual is *bodily* one and the same as the cobbler, he is to be held accountable for the prince's, not the cobbler's, past actions: thus, he is the one to be praised or blamed for the prince's good or bad actions, he is the one who is committed to keeping a promise that the prince made, and, we may suppose, he is the one to whom *I* am committed by a promise that I made to the prince. These, and other things of the same kind, are what is involved in the claim that the person in the cobbler's body is the same person as - *is* - the prince. While, then, the person before us is not *bodily* one and the same as the prince - while it is not the same 'man': the same 'human being' - it is the same 'person' as the prince.

In one sense Locke is here close to Descartes. Both hold that there is no difficulty in the idea that, for example, I should continue to exist in another body (as, perhaps, both hold that there is no difficulty in the idea that I should continue to exist in a totally disembodied form.) Locke was, however, convinced that there are serious problems with the view that it is 'having the same non-material soul' that is crucial to my being the same person as one who did a certain thing in the past. The point that Locke stresses here is not so much the one that I raised - one about my *knowledge* of who I am - but rather one about my *concern* about who I am. He argues that 'having the same non-material soul' is not something about which we can *care* in the way that we care about who we are. Locke makes his point in this way:

Let anyone reflect upon himself, and conclude that he has in himself an immaterial spirit, which is that which thinks in him, and, in the constant change of his body keeps him the same: and is that which he calls himself. Let him also suppose it to be the same soul that was in Nestor or Thersites at the siege of Troy (for souls being, as far as we know anything of them, in their nature indifferent to any parcel of matter, the supposition has no apparent absurdity in it), which it may have been, as well as it is now the soul of any other man; but he now having no consciousness of any of the actions either of Nestor or Thersites, does or can he conceive himself the same person with either of them? Can he be concerned in either of their

⁶ Locke, *ibid.*, section 15. For a brief discussion of 'body swaps' that raises points that are closely related to earlier discussions of Wittgenstein in this module, see Bernard Williams, 'Personal identity and individuation', pages 11-12 of his *Problems of the Self*.

actions? attribute them to himself, or think them his own, more than the actions of any other man that ever existed?⁷

Locke takes it to be clear that the answer to these questions is 'No'. He concludes that what is crucial to the idea that a particular past thought is one that *I* had, or a particular past action one that *I* performed, is not my 'having (or 'being') the same soul' as the person who had that thought or performed that action.

What is crucial for this is, Locke suggests, to be found by reflecting on what makes a particular thought or sensation that is now being undergone *my* thought or sensation. What is crucial here is, on the face of it, the fact that I am conscious of - have an inside awareness of - that thought or sensation. For example, it follows from the fact that I am aware of a pain in the characteristic first personal way - that is to say, that I *feel* the pain - that the pain in question is *my* pain. Perhaps, then, we should simply extend this idea to *past* thoughts, sensations and actions: what is crucial to the idea that a particular past thought is one that *I* had, or a particular past action one that *I* performed, is the fact that I am conscious - have an inside awareness - of it.

It follows from Locke's view that it could be true that I am the same person as the one who did a certain thing in the past even though the substance - both material and immaterial - of which I am composed is quite different. For if I have an inside memory of having done it then I *am* the one who did it; and that is so quite independently of whether this soul - the one that I 'am' or 'have' - is the one that was initially present in, for example, Nestor's or Thersites' body. And if it seems odd to suggest that 'being composed of the same substance' is irrelevant to 'being the same person', we should remember, as Locke does, that we are quite ready to speak in this way in other cases. We say that this is the same tree as the one that was standing here 30 years ago even though there has been a radical change in the 'material substance' - the physical particles - of which it is composed. Some philosophers - Hume is a notable example - have been deeply suspicious of our readiness to speak in this way. But, in the absence of a decent argument, we may have to put this down to a philosophical prejudice.

Locke's view appears to do much better justice than does the 'sameness of soul' account to the idea, central to Descartes' general approach to the self, that knowledge of oneself is immediate and infallible. In the present context this is the idea that the individual herself has immediate and infallible 'inside' knowledge of who she is: for example, that she is the one who signed the documents last week. With this, Locke's view also does justice to our intuitive sense of how we should think of certain remarkable phenomena related to his Nestor and Thersites example. I am thinking here of the many reported cases in which a young child - characteristically one who has quite recently learned to talk - appears to have a substantial body of 'inside' knowledge of the life of a person who died before she was born.⁸ She makes detailed claims about this person's life: claims that are substantiated by later investigation. The knowledge is 'inside' in the sense,

⁷ Locke, *ibid.*, section 14

⁸ See, for example, Ian Stevenson, *Twenty Cases Suggestive of Reincarnation* (University Press of Virginia, 1974)

first, that it appears that the information has not in some way been transmitted to the child by another; and, second, that she experiences the knowledge that she has of this other life as a 'memory' of it: for example, she spontaneously speaks of things the 'remembered' person did as things that *she* has done. Now many will, no doubt, be sceptical about the authenticity of such reports. But if such a case *could* be authenticated, many, perhaps most, might feel little hesitation in speaking of the child as the reincarnation of the earlier individual. This response, it seems, reflects our intuitive sense of the correctness of Locke's approach.

Problems for the memory view

While Locke's view has powerful attractions, it is, I think, pretty clear that, as it stands, it will not do. To see this, we must notice first that care is needed in its formulation. We might express the view in this way: 'I am the person who robbed the bank if and only if I remember robbing the bank'. Now expressions of the form 'I remember robbing the bank' are, in our normal speech, used in two rather different ways. In some cases they are used simply to report an impression that I now have. 'I distinctly remember leaving the keys on the sideboard' I say; and I continue to say 'That is how I remember it' even once it has been clearly established that I did not leave them there. But in a different use of the words 'I remember robbing the bank' or 'I remember leaving the keys on the sideboard' we will insist that if it turns out that he did not rob the bank then his words were simply not true: it *seems* to him that he remembers robbing the bank, but he doesn't really.

Now in which of these ways should we read the suggestion that *I* am the one who performed a certain action if and only if I 'remember' performing it? It seems clear that if we read it in the *second* way we lose the sense of immediate and infallible knowledge of who I am which Locke is trying to hold on to. For while it will follow from the fact that 'I remember robbing the bank' that I did rob the bank, *I* will have no special authority in judging whether I really do remember robbing the bank. Others - for example, the nurse on the psychiatric ward where I was a patient at the time of the robbery - may know better than I do that I do not *really* remember robbing the bank; it only seems to me that I remember it. Closely linked with this is the fact that, given this reading, it can hardly be said that we explain what it is for Jim to be the one who robbed the bank by saying 'He remembers doing so'; for in explaining what is required for it to be true that he really does remember we will have to speak of the fact that he is the one who robbed the bank!

Staying with this case, but switching to the *first* sense of 'remember', it can be said that I remember robbing the bank without first establishing that I *did* rob it: for to say that 'I remember robbing the bank' is simply to report an impression that I now have. In *this* sense, we might say, a person has immediate and infallible knowledge of his own memories. But taken in *this* sense, it clearly does not follow from the fact that I 'remember' doing something that I was the one who did it. We would normally assume that it could, in practice, seem quite clear to someone that he did a certain thing and yet it not at all follow that he was the one who did it.

Further, whichever sense of 'remember' we employ here, Locke's view appears to face the following objection. There are cases in which we readily say that this is the person who did a certain thing even though she does not remember doing it. For example, there are many things that I did as a child which I do not now remember doing. Are we to say on that account that it was not really *me* who did them?

In these objections I am following closely points made in an article by Antony Flew. If you are not convinced by the points as I have made them, or if you would just like to pursue these issues further, I strongly suggest that you read this article: the reference is given at the end of this section. Further, if you do think Locke might be able to answer the objections I have raised, I strongly suggest that you now make a note of how you think he could do so.

The importance of personal identity

In the objections to Locke's account that I have raised I have appealed to our normal views about when it can be said that this is the *same* person as one who did a certain thing in the past. I have suggested, on these grounds, that Locke's view cannot be a satisfactory account of what we normally mean when we say this kind of thing. Now it might be replied that this only shows that our normal ways of speaking about these matters are deeply confused. It might be added that Locke is offering us a revised understanding of what is involved in our identity over time: one which is not open to the charge of confusion. Clearly that is a possible position. But the charge of 'confusion' will have to be substantiated. On the face of it, Locke has done no more than show that his view fits with at least *some* of our intuitions better than does the Cartesian alternative.

How might it be shown that one view of what is crucial to being the same person over time is to be preferred to another? Perhaps a variety of forms of argument are possible. In any case, when considering any such argument it is important to bear in mind that what is at issue here is not simply what we say. As Locke stresses, our views about the identity of people are closely bound up with a whole range of practices and feelings that have a central place in our lives. Locke focuses in particular on our practices of reward and punishment. We can only punish a man for a crime if he was the one who committed it. The same point applies to such responses to others as praise, blame, gratitude and resentment; and to feelings about oneself such as pride and guilt. Again, an understanding of *who* this is may be central to our personal relationship with another. I may feel a special commitment to this person because she is my mother: the one who gave birth to me and raised me. I may feel bound to this woman in a special way because, in a wedding ceremony, I made a commitment to stay with her until death. Perhaps more significantly, the particular character of the love or respect that I feel for another may be very closely bound up with my sense that this is a person who has a certain past, or, more specifically, with whom I share, a certain past.

It is possible that Locke did not appreciate just how deeply his account would bring him into conflict with feelings and practices that few of us will give up lightly. You may want to reflect further on such conflicts yourself: asking yourself just how widespread and significant they are. We will now, however, turn to a view that, while having significant affinities with Locke's, has been thought by some to avoid its most obvious difficulties.

(iii) The psychological continuity view

I mentioned earlier Hume's suggestion that when we introspect we do not find a *self* that *has* thoughts, feelings and so on; we find only the thoughts and feelings themselves. Having allowed, with characteristic irony, that there may be metaphysicians who have more luck than he does, Hume comments:

But setting aside some metaphysicians of this kind, I may venture to affirm of the rest of mankind, that they are nothing but a bundle or collection of perceptions, which succeed each other with an inconceivable rapidity, and are in a perpetual flux and movement... . They are the successive perceptions only, that constitute the mind.⁹

Hume's suggestion echoes ideas that are found in Buddhist thinking:

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."¹⁰

Closely related ideas have a strong hold in certain quarters of contemporary Western philosophy. In particular, Derek Parfit has argued that we must understand the links between a person at different stages of her life, not in terms of some persisting individual that *has* all of the emotions, sensations and so on that we think of as hers, but in terms of certain *connections between* these 'mental' ('psychological') characteristics at different times. The connection, stressed by Locke, between a thought or action and a later memory of it is one such psychological link. But there are many others. There is the connection between an intention to do something and the later performance of that action. There are the connections of similarity between the beliefs, desires and interests of a person at one time and the 'same' person at a later time. More broadly, we may speak of the similarity in character between a person at one stage of his life and the 'same' person at a later stage.

Now consider a human being - John Williams - who lives for 90 years, during which time he undergoes significant changes in his psychological characteristics. Between JW on any one day of his life and JW on the next day there are very close psychological connections: he has very similar beliefs and character, on the second day he remembers much of what he thought and did on the first, and so on. Such *direct* connections will be weaker over a longer time span. The beliefs and character of the 50 year old are very different from those of the 5 year old, the 50 year old has very limited memories of the 5 year old's life, and so on. Nevertheless the 50 year old is 'psychologically continuous' with the 5 year old. That is to say, his psychological characteristics developed out of those of the 5 year old through a series of stages: at each stage there being close direct psychological connections with the previous stage. In *that* sense we can say that the 50 year old is the 'same' person as the 5 year old. But once we give up the idea that the important thing is some underlying core - such as a Cartesian 'soul' - which links the 5 year old with the 50 year old we will, it is suggested, no longer feel that this sense in which he can be said to be the 'same' person is of much significance. It is direct psychological connections that are the *significant* links between different stages of a

⁹ David Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I, part iv, sec vi

¹⁰ Cila Mara

person's life. There is a *significant*, an important, sense in which JW today is the same person as JW last year only if the person at each of these times has closely similar character, memories and so on.

Parfit's view is clearly similar to that which the Buddha seems to present. Both deny that there is some core which *underlies* the psychological elements and which is the important link between different stages of a person's life. They agree that where there has been a substantial change in psychological characteristics there is no significant, but only a 'conventional' sense in which it can be said that we have the same person. They perhaps *disagree* over what we should say where there has not been such a substantial change. While the Buddha seems to suggest that even here there is no significant sense in which it can be said that we have the same person, Parfit maintains that in such a case there *is* a significant sense in which this can be said. Closely connected with that is the fact that the Buddha is, on the face of it, calling for a much more radical revision in our current thought about ourselves than is Parfit.

One example - perhaps the central example - of the revision demanded by the Buddhist view relates to the individual's thought about his or her 'own future'. Most of us have a sense that there is a very important difference between a case in which it will be *me* who suffers pain tomorrow and a case in which *someone else* will suffer pain tomorrow. This sense of a deep difference is reflected in the very different feelings that we have in the two cases; and in the degree of trouble to which we are generally prepared to go to try to ensure that the pain is not felt. For the Buddha, by contrast, there is no important sense, only a conventional one, in which 'I' will be around tomorrow; a pain will be felt tomorrow, but there is no important contrast between the case in which it will, as we say, be 'me' who feels it and that in which it will be someone else. Parfit's view is less radical. There may be no important sense in which it will be 'me' who suffers some painful illness in 30 years time; but, provided that I am closely psychologically connected with him, there is an important sense in which the person who will suffer pain tomorrow is me.

How are we to decide between the Buddha's and Parfit's interpretation of the 'no-self' view? They agree about what connections hold between different stages of a person's life, but disagree about the *importance* of particular connections. It might be argued that the Buddha is clearly right on the following grounds: if there is no unchanging substance at the core of our being then there is no significant sense in which I am the same person from one moment to the next. But Locke's example of the tree should remind us that we need an *argument* for that claim.

Parfit defends *his* point of view by appealing to what he takes to be our everyday sense of what is of value in a personal relationship. In this he follows the argument of another contemporary philosopher - Antony Quinton. Quinton writes:

For why, after all, do we bother to identify' people so carefully? What is unique about individual people that is important enough for us to call them by individual proper names? In our general relations with other human beings their bodies are for the most part intrinsically unimportant. We use them as convenient recognition devices enabling us to locate

without difficulty the persisting character and memory complexes in which we are interested, which we love or like.¹¹

It is quite clear, Quinton and Parfit argue, that in so far as I genuinely care for another as an individual person (as opposed, for example, to simply caring for her as a sexual object) it is her particular set of psychological characteristics that is at the centre of my understanding of her. I will, then, think of the other as, in the *important* sense, the 'same' person so long, but only so long, as she has roughly the same psychological characteristics. We should conclude that 'having the same psychological characteristics' - being 'closely psychologically connected' - is a significant - is *the* significant - connection between stages of a life. A person in 2003 is, in the *important* sense, the 'same' person as one in 2004 if and only if the one is closely psychologically connected with the other. And if, in practice, we often identify people by their bodies - if we take this to be the same person as the one I have known for many years on the basis of the fact that she is *bodily* continuous with that person - that is, or should be, only because 'sameness of body' is generally good *evidence* of 'sameness of psychological characteristics'. Being the same bodily being - the same human being (or, as Locke puts it, the same 'man') - is not, *in itself*, something of any importance at all.

This argument appeals to something that we might call our 'ethical' sense of what is of value in a personal relationship: it is suggested that reflection of what is *important* in a personal relationship will lead us to the conclusion that the body is, intrinsically, quite irrelevant to questions about *who* this is. What do you think we should make of this suggestion?

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My own view is that it is badly confused. My suspicion is that it gains some plausibility from certain ways in which we sometimes speak, but that that plausibility dissolves on closer inspection. Consider, for example, the way in which a woman might say of her husband: 'This is not the man I married'; or the way in which we might say of an elderly person who has suffered a stroke: 'She is not the person she once was'. While such expressions may seem to harmonize nicely with Parfit's view, care is needed. For it may be - indeed I think it is - that the sense of such words depends on an acceptance that there is a straightforward sense in which the person of whom we are speaking *is* the very one that we knew before.

To see this, compare such cases with one in which I say 'This is not the car it once was'. My words, I take it, mean something like: 'It has lost many of the features that it once had' - features that, perhaps, played an important role in my being initially attracted to it. But it is only true that it has 'lost' these features if, in a straightforward sense, it is the very car that once had those features; and, closely connected with that, there would, in such a case, be no possible grounds for arresting me on the basis of 'the fact that I am driving around in a car that is not mine - the one I bought 10 years ago'.

¹¹ A. Quinton, 'The Soul, *The Journal of Philosophy*, 1962, p 402

Now while the importance that the idea of 'being the same person' has is quite different from that which the idea of 'being the same car' has, an analogue of the above point may apply there. For example, consider a case in which someone undergoes radical psychological change as the result of, say, a severe stroke. Might we not say that the particular tragedy of such cases is dependent on the idea that there is a quite straightforward sense in which this *is* the same person? While it is true that some children abandon their aged and decrepit parents in geriatric wards, it is not at all clear that we should take their doing so as reflecting a doubt about who this is. Indeed, it might be, in part, quite the reverse. It is precisely *because* it is quite clear that this is my father that the thought of visits is such a nightmare. If I did not accept so unambiguously that this is my father I might be able to visit him with little discomfort; and, to mention another face of the same point, I might not feel the guilt that I do about not visiting him.

The same point applies to the horror that a parent feels on learning that her child has suffered serious brain damage. On the view outlined by Quinton and Parfit, this would - or should - be for the parent the same as her child's death. But I take it that this suggestion involves a serious distortion of the way in which at least many people do, in practice, feel in such circumstances. There is one sense in which many might find such a situation more agonizing than one in which their child dies; for what is so dreadful about the situation is the fact that it is *John* - my child - that is in this condition.

These are extreme examples of what are, I think, familiar features of our feelings for another in the more normal cases of gradual change over time. Now it does not, of course, follow from the fact that, at least in many of us, concern for some others does take the form of which I have been speaking, that it *ought* to do so. My point is just that a little reflection may lead us to doubt whether Quinton and Parfit can really count on our intuitions at the point at which their argument needs them. Remember that their argument was of this form: reflection of what is *important* in a personal relationship will lead us to the conclusion that the body is, intrinsically, quite irrelevant to questions about who this is; and that it is 'having the same psychological characteristics' that is *the* significant connection between stages of a life. I have suggested that such reflection should, in fact, lead us in a quite different direction. As we might express this: it is one thing to be attracted to a particular set of psychological characteristics and quite another to be attached to a particular person. While I may love the stories and the sense of humour of the man I meet regularly in the pub, if I simply move over to someone else when his peculiar knack with stories begins to slip away there is a sense in which it can be said that the *person* was of no concern to me. With that, while it may be true that in some cases what first attracts me to another is her particular psychological characteristics, if I come to care for *her* my commitment takes on a form such that it has at least some independence of those characteristics. It is, I want to suggest, central to anything that most of us would want to speak of as 'love' for another that it is relatively resilient in the face of changes in both bodily and psychological change.

Reinstating the body

Suppose that we take as our starting point the way in which another may continue to occupy a quite special place in my feelings despite radical changes in her characteristics. And suppose that we add to this the fact - as I think it is - that many feel that there is something particularly admirable in a 'love' in which this feature is powerful. We might

add, too, the way in which my fear of a pain that 'I' will undergo tomorrow might be in no way compromised by the information that I will, before then, suffer brain damage - brain damage of a form such that the person who suffers tomorrow will be psychologically quite different from me today.¹² Focusing on these intuitions we might be drawn to a quite different way of thinking of what is crucial to 'being the same person' over time. It seems clear that 'being the same human being' - 'being the same bodily being' - is of central importance in much of our normal thought about sameness of people. And it is not at any rate *obvious* that this is a reflection of something in our nature that we will, on reflection, wish to disown.

We might summarize the route my argument has followed in this way. In the form of an individual's knowledge of who she herself is, we may be tempted to see a decisive objection to the proposal that the body is crucial to the idea of 'being the same person over time'; but this temptation rests on an illusion that Wittgenstein exposes. Having seen through the illusion, we can acknowledge that in developing an account of what is crucial to *being the same person* we should strive to satisfy two requirements. First, our account should be such as to allow that I can sometimes know who a particular person is: know that this - whether myself or another - is the same person as one who did a certain thing in the past. And second, our account should be such as to leave room for the thought that this is one and the same person - say, John - even though there has been a radical change in his psychological (and, of course, physical) characteristics. I suggested that 'the simple soul view' - that which emerges most naturally from Descartes' discussion of the self - fails the first of these tests; and that 'the psychological continuity view', along with its earlier incarnation as 'the memory view', fails the second of my tests. By contrast with these approaches, a view that gives central place to the *human being* - to the physical continuity of this bodily being - appears to meet both of these requirements. Of course, it might be that there are other reasons for supposing that any such view must be rejected. In the absence of such reasons, however, I tentatively draw the following conclusion: far from being wholly destructive of everything of value in our thought about, and relations with, each other, only a view of our identity over time that gives central place to the body can do justice to fundamental aspects of that value. As we can put this: we should at least consider the possibility that Locke's enormously influential distinction between being the same 'person' and being the same 'human being' ('man') is one of which we should be suspicious.

Of course, I do not expect you to - I do not *want* you to - accept my conclusion on trust. If, however, it seems to you clearly incorrect, I would like you to get quite clear in your mind just where the argument that I have presented goes wrong.

Reading

For an extremely clear and detailed presentation of both the importance of Locke's contribution to the debate and the difficulties in his view see Antony Flew, 'Locke and the Problem of Personal Identity'. David Hume's discussion of personal identity can be found in *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Book I Part iv section 6. Derek Parfit defends his views in his paper 'Personal Identity', and in much greater detail in his *Reasons and*

¹² For a nice discussion of cases of roughly this kind see Bernard Williams, 'The self and the future', in his *Problems of the Self*.

Persons. Quinton's paper 'The Soul' is a more straightforward presentation of the key idea developed in Parfit's work. For a useful introduction to Buddhist views and their relation, in particular, to Parfit's position see Steven Collins' paper 'Buddhism in Recent British Philosophy and Theology'. For a strong defence of the idea that it is the body that is crucial to the identity of a person over time, see the first four essays in Bernard Williams, *Problems of the Self*. An excellent introduction to the topic of this section, and one that leans towards the 'bodily' view, can be found in John Perry, *A Dialogue on Personal Identity and Immortality*. See also John Perry (ed), *Personal Identity*: this useful collection contains a number of the above papers.