

HPPH7011 Mind and Body: Descartes and Wittgenstein

Assignment 2

Andrew Kristoffer Dean

Student Number: 1810029

Question 5: What should we make of Antony Quinton's suggestion, in the context of a discussion of the identity of a person over time, that the bodies of others are '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'?

Introduction

In this essay, I will tackle a particularly thorny philosophical issue by addressing Quinton's (1962, p. 402) comment, that bodies are *'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'*. From a common-sense perspective, it might seem strange to ruminate on the degree to which we can recognise other persons, particularly as most of us would probably manage to locate friends, family, and acquaintances without too much trouble throughout our lives. Of course, this comment is predicated on an initial ability to recognise someone in the first place, and furthermore, develop and maintain an epistemological foundation for ongoing recognition. Sidestepping, the more troublesome aspect of how initial recognition takes place, at least for now, let us imagine that I am introduced to a long-term acquaintance and say: "I'm not sure who you are". Such a comment might lead you to raise an eyebrow in surprise, and question why I am struggling to recognise my acquaintance? Perhaps the most obvious answer is that there has been a profound change in my acquaintance's appearance. But what if this isn't the case? What if there has been no substantive physiological change? Might it be that I am suffering from some form of perceptual pathology? (Sacks, 2022). Alternatively that I am pharmacologically intoxicated? (Shanon, 2010). Or even mischievously playing linguistic and philosophical games with you? While all these questions are valid, there is of course a deeper philosophical matter at hand, which is how well we can ever really recognise someone through the externality of the body, and just as importantly, appreciate the nether realms of self, such as our psychological states. Consequently, and to help create a better understanding of this issue, this essay will explore how perceiving the body juxtaposes a simplistic, but at times, dubious epistemological means to recognise the fluctuating nature of personal identity, in space, and across time (Crawford & Krebs, 1998).

Drawing this section to a close, I will start to address Quinton's (1962) comments driving this essay in the following sections, by exploring 'personal identity' first and then subsequently examining 'recognising the person'. Finally, and pulling this essay together, the last section engages in a 'discussion and conclusion'.

Personal Identity

Although humans require a body, at least during this mortal lifetime, it seems fair to say that we have a curious relationship with our physicality. This is particularly apparent when we consider how we speak about our bodies belonging to us, but also being dear to us, and in turn requiring legal and medical protection, while raising acute metaphysical problems about who and what we are in our day-to-day lives (Hardcastle, 2009). Taking a blunt approach for a moment, and irrespective of what we really are as humans, it seems fair to say that we are often deeply uncomfortable with the premise of being purely physical, not only because it suggests we face annihilation at the end of our lifecycles, but that we frequently struggle to define our embodiment in a coherent metaphysical and linguistic sense (Smith & Jones, 1997), which I will now go on to explain. If, we turn our attention to how we speak about ourselves, we often see profound discursive difficulties, as highlighted by my paraphrasing of Perry's (2008) embodied word playing. For example, if I say: "I was slapped", I can linguistically substitute this to "my body was slapped" without too much oddity, and you will probably acknowledge I am still talking about me. In other words, I am, at some level, my body. Likewise, if I comment "I see you", we might disagree over what I am and what you are exactly, but we would probably accept that I is in part my body, and if you are perceptually visible, that you are at least partially material. Yet should I say: "my body sees you", I am separating myself from my body, and it sounds rather odd. It also leads me to question what this body of mine is seeing of you. Even stranger, though, should I say: "I visited a friend yesterday", It suggests that I was there in totality, body, and any other core parts that are key to being me. Unless you believe that I had an out of body experience, which is not how most would interpret my phrasing. However, if I changed this to: "my body visited a friend yesterday", it clearly suggests that I was not there, and am not my body. Depending on how we view this last phrasing, we are forced to embrace a linguistic and ontological absurdity or open the metaphysical door for me to be immaterially floating elsewhere in time and body away from my body, perhaps through transmigration. Accepting that some may view this as just the limitations of language (Luhmann, 2012), I would hope that you see that we often lack linguistic coherence and can easily create

metaphysical mischief when we fail to systematise our notions of our perceptual selves and each other.

Considering the acute the challenges we all face in self-identification, and in recognising and identifying others, it is hardly surprising that there is a tendency to background the material parts of being human (Leder, 1990), and embed ourselves within more pre-theorised notions, or focus on alternative mental, spiritual, or immaterial versions of the person (Sauchelli, 2020). This being said, we might wonder why anyone, beyond the philosophically minded, would be interested in exploring issues of the body, recognition, and personal identity? As a starting point, we must remember that our ability to define, negotiate, and recognise ourselves and each other has underpinned numerous parts of our socio-cultural systems, including, law, medicine, and religion, for thousands of years (Lawler, 2013). Thus, whether we like it or not, ongoing consideration must be given to ontologically and epistemologically negotiating ourselves within many of our modern systems, at least, if such systems are to cope with recognising us. More bluntly, our day-to-day lives require, that we are, at some level, the same person, while also accepting substantive physical and cognitive shifts within our natural lifecycles (Garrison, 2010; Hardcastle, 2009).

How we identify and come to recognise phenomena is a fundamental cognitive and social part of being human (Thompson, 2010). Critically, for us to recognise any phenomenon, requires an initial act of identifying, based on the act of negotiating what makes two things the same, share a degree of sameness, or be regarded as different (Rorty, 1976). For humans, it is of course worth saying that there is a subset of identity, which separates us from things, and generally other species, which we refer to as personal identity (Reid, 2008). Not surprisingly, and considering the long history of personal identity, there are a multitude of definitions helping us explore different notions of ourselves and others. For example, when Reid (2008, p. 109) argued: ‘My personal identity, therefore, implies the continued existence of that indivisible thing which I call *myself*’, we see multiple metaphysical statements being made, particularly towards a rejecting of the body. Alternatively, when Locke (1975, p. 39), said that a person is: ‘a thinking intelligent being, that has reason and reflection, and can consider itself as itself, the same thinking thing, in different times and places’, we see a different perspective drawing more on cognition. Critically though, and for all the ink spilt, it is worth noting that there has been little systematisation of what it means to have a personal identity within the philosophical community, with diverging opinions remaining (Bourget & Chalmers, 2014).

Yet, for these difficulties, Perry (2008, p. 7) reminds us that: ‘In studying the problem of personal identity, we are learning about our own concept of a person, trying to articulate and analyze knowledge we in a sense already have’. Expanding on this, Rorty (1976, p. 4-5) argued:

‘And for ourselves, we are interested in our identity because we make choices that will affect our futures: we set in motion a train of actions whose consequences involve “our” well-being, without knowing whether we shall have, in the future, the desires and beliefs that now govern our planning’.

You might ask, what allows something to have a personal identity? I mean, is it strictly necessary for there to be materiality? Does a personal identity require a body? Not surprisingly and reminding ourselves that such debates have been carried out over thousands of years, the issue of who and what can be a person is often troublesome, particularly for whether we take a more theological view, and allow God, the Devil, angels, demons, and even deceased humans to be considered persons (Webster, Tanner & Torrance, 2009). It must be said, however, that for those taking this view, that these ‘persons’ would be viewed not through the more usual mundane senses, but rather through the mind, which the faithful often claim is an otherworldly form of sensory perception (Calvin, 1960). While such religious consideration clearly goes beyond the remit of this essay, it does turn our attention to whether the body is required for recognising a person through their identity. Critically, though, as we come to learn more about the limits of being and increase our understanding of personal identity, it is worth reflecting on whether we will seek to include other species, and perhaps even ‘disembodied’ persons such as artificial intelligence into this category of identity (Godfrey-Smith, 2021). Furthermore, taking into account future technoscientific advancements, perhaps we should not be surprised if we seek to renegotiate personal identity, especially as innovations will allow us to have greater agency for deciding who we want, and do not want to be (Corley & Gioia, 2004). It must be said though, that the more we seek to alter ourselves, the more challenges we are likely to create for recognising ourselves in relation to our externality and internality.

Broadly speaking, from a philosophical perspective, it must be noted that there is a tendency to disregard the requirement for a body (Kind, 2015), at least for how personal identity is defined (Boethius, 1918; Locke, 1975; Strawson, 1959). The challenge, with putting a heavy emphasis on the body as personal identity is the potential to undermine what it means to be a person if there is a loss of bodily function or integrity (Damasio, 1994). Yet, and as mentioned

earlier, this is a complex balancing act, as clearly living bodies have the tendency to be offered legal protection and medicine, and even dead bodies are typically afforded some dignity (Feinberg & Levenbrook, 1992). Critically though, some caution should be shown though with how we conceptualise the body and personal identity, as if we dismiss the body in entirety, we would be left with profound difficulties in recognising ourselves and each other. Clearly, therefore, and for practical perceptual reasons, I am not suggesting that we do this, but rather that we explore how we can adequately recognise someone.

Having developed a basic understanding of personal identity, the following section addresses the challenge of recognising the person via their identity. As will become apparent, this is a surprisingly complex issue when we consider the large degrees of physical and psychological changes that occurs throughout the average human lifecycle.

Recognising the Person

Imagine meeting someone, gazing at them, and immediately recognising them as your acquaintance. Within itself, you would probably argue that this happens all the time and is nothing unusual. But how certain are you that this is your acquaintance? What was the epistemological basis for having this certainty? Or perhaps, you were not sure at the beginning, and something convinced you that this is your friend. Considering that humans are perceptually limited, cannot read minds or deep psychological states, apart from the limited elements that show on the external extremities, we might ponder on how we actually recognise a person, if at all. Well, clearly, we do manage to some degree, but the critical question is, what does it mean to recognise someone? Is it as simple as looking at the human body? The face? The eyes? Or is it more related to engaging with their cognitive processes and memory? (Marsh et al., 2021). While there is often little agreement over this matter, and as Kind (2015, p. 8) highlighted, there are three salient approaches to how we identify and indeed come to recognise a person, including:

1. 'The identification question: what properties must a being have to count as a person?
2. The reidentification question: what makes a person the same over time?
3. The characterization question: what makes a person the person that she is?'

As we can see, these questions showcase multiple challenges for recognition, which are not necessarily mutually exclusive to one another. Overviewing Kind's (2015) comments, it is worth reflecting on how a physicalist might approach these issues, as by considering this aspect, we can turn our attention to an explicit embodied notion of being and how we recognise physical elements of personal identity. Walking this path, and for a physicalist, it might be argued that personal identity rests on having (1) the same body, (2) being the same biological being, or (3) having the same brain (Kind, 2015). From a common-sense perspective this approach is certainly convenient, as within reasonably defined temporal and embodied parameters, I should be able to recognise you if we have met before (Thomson, 1997). While removing a number of key metaphysical challenges to recognising the person, this overt physicalist approach suggests that the externality of your body is basically you. Reminding ourselves that people tend to wear clothes, it is unlikely that recognition is based on an unclothed body. Rather, therefore, I suspect, that recognising the body means the face, and other key epistemological signifiers such as hair colour/length, and appendages. But what if you suffer a physical loss of some sort? I would imagine that a minor loss of self, such as trimmed hair or nails would be unlikely to create any substantive epistemological issue for recognition. However, I might easily make a perceptual mistake if you were severely disfigured, altered your hair style drastically, or changed your clothing several times in a day. At least in the interim that is. Of course, what we are really philosophically wrestling with here is that: (1) human bodies change over time, to varying degrees, (2) are not veridical accounts of our internal states, and (3) perceiving the person can be a complex act of looking beyond simple physical signifiers (Gallup, 1970). Just as importantly, (4) that our inner physicality is rarely, if ever perceptible, and as such, plays no meaningful part in recognition.

Looking at temporality, it is fair to say that all material things in this universe exist in a state of change, but for the human body, our physicality shifts rapidly over a relatively short period of time (Lloyd, 1970). Yet, and on a day-to-day basis, we seem to cope with adjusting our perception, at least in most cases, and continue to recognise the basic diachronic identity of the person (Kind, 2015). The challenge, with diachronic identification is ultimately one of reidentification across the lifecycle, which also raises the troublesome epistemological aspect of whether a person ontologically remains the same over time? (Rorty, 1976). Within itself, this is not an easy question to answer, as starting as a foetus, albeit rarely recognised as a person, humans clearly go through substantive physical and mental changes, leading to the question, when is it in my lifetime that my personal identity really represents me? Taking a

relatively simple, and mundane example, even my laugh, which creates an auditory epistemological tool to identify me, changes over time. Looking more fundamentally at the body, and trying to scientifically rectify this difficulty in recognising the person, perhaps we should take DNA measurements to continually allow us to track the same person? While I suspect that biologists might relish this challenge, I cannot imagine how we would even attempt to carry out molecular recognition at such a large social scale. Problematically though, while DNA measurements would allow the same material person to be recognised by molecular means over their life cycles, we would learn almost nothing about their inner psychological states. More fundamentally, this approach suggests that you are only really your body.

To further highlight the limitations of bodily recognition, I would like to briefly explore potential advancements in biomedical engineering and imagine a technoscientific breakthrough where I can replicate an exact copy of you, i.e., a material and mental doppelganger. In this initial instant of duplicated creation, I suppose that you would have a reasonable grasp of your other, and they of you. But this would be severely limited, as first of all, no individual truly knows themselves, and furthermore, with every second that passes, these individuals would experience a divergence based on life experience at the molecular, physiological and mental levels, creating ever greater separations of being. Of course, you might argue that I am putting too much weight on embodiment, and that if we are more of a soul, or even in part immaterial, that what matters is this inner essence of sorts. While I have some sympathy with this notion, by positioning ourselves as charioteers driving chariots (Finamore, 1985) we only complicate how well anyone can recognise this more ethereal notion of self. Within itself though, and irrespective of whether we have a soul, an immaterial aspect of self, or our mental states are produced biologically, the challenge is that our outer physiological expressions and behaviours are not a veridical or exhaustive account of our inner selves (Thompson, 2010).

Broadly speaking, there is an increasing move to reject the body as having any meaningful role in our personal identities (Perry, 2008), with Shoemaker (1972, p. 45) arguing ‘that memory provides a criterion of personal identity’. Taking a similar approach, Grice (1941, p. 119) said: ‘the self is a logical construction and is to be defined in terms of memory’. While memory is not necessarily accessible by others, it can of course be articulated by the individual, and used to display elements of personal identity. Taking a wider view, and drawing on Locke (1975), if a person requires consciousness, rationalism, and an ability to know oneself, then all such elements are potentially available within social relations to give signs of personal identity, and

to enable recognition. The same can be said for taking memory to be a foundation of personal identity, which Perry (2008, p. 121) argued creates ‘a spatiotemporal continuity’ akin to the physical body. Importantly though, while memory can be enacted through behaviour and speech to create signifiers of personal identity, memory is itself a poor recorder of veridical events. Perhaps, though, the issue of recognising the individual through memory is not so much about what is remembered being an explicit, coherent, or even accurate depiction of life events, but more that it creates an opportunity for social relations to arise, and for shared historic notions to catalyse recognition between individuals, whether real or imagined. While it might be tempting to approach recognising personal identity through consciousness, we should remember that like memories, our conscious states of mind remain in a state of temporal flux, typically as a result of our daily life cycles, which again creates ongoing problems for using them for recognition.

Discussion and Conclusions

Reminding ourselves that this essay set out to address Quinton’s (1962, p. 402) comment that our bodies are ‘*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*’, we have seen several of the key philosophical challenges in undertaking this perceptual endeavour. Problematically, and from a common cultural view, even attempting to explore this issue is in many ways counterintuitive to how we live our lives, and the simplicity with which we frequently embrace social relations. This is hardly surprising though, when we consider that in the absence of pathology or other perceptual aberrations, that our bodies appear to function as an efficient epistemological means to recognise the physical person, and to varying degrees, deeper elements of being, such as moods and behaviours (Bourget & Chalmers, 2014). Having said this, the extent to which the body provides access to a ‘persisting character’, and ‘memory complexes’ (Quinton, 1962, p. 402) is a complex matter. Bluntly, it seems that few really believe that most of the external body gives any meaningful way to know the person, beyond simple traits. Having said this, as the most expressive aspect of being, the face is of course much more indicative of our personal identities. For example, it is increasingly clear that features such as the eyes continually relay biological information about ourselves, typically in relation to mating, and fight and flight (Scheele et al., 2022). While scientific advancements may continue to reveal hitherto undemonstrated communicative aspects of being human, we should show some caution in what we can reveal and allow others to recognise through our external physiology. In other words, while we can attempt to show ourselves through our

bodies, and what we say and do, our inner realms remain partially shrouded, not only from ourselves, but from others. Consequently, and drawing this essay to a close, the body is at best a useful guide, but within it reside core aspects of being, that we often struggle to perceive.

References

A. M. S. Boethius, 'The theological tractates and the consolation of philosophy', (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1918).

D. Bourget., & D. Chalmers, 'What do philosophers believe?' *Philosophical Studies*, 170: 465-500.

J. Calvin, '*Institutes of the Christian religion*', (London: S.C.M., 1960).

K. G. Corley, & D. A. Gioia, 'Identity and ambiguity and change in the wake of a corporate spin-off', *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 49(2), 173-208, 2004.

C. Crawford, & D. L. Krebs. 'Handbook of evolutionary psychology: ideas, issues, and applications', (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1998).

A. Damasio, 'Descartes' error: Emotion, reason, and the human brain', (London: Avon Books, 1994).

J. Feinberg, & B. B. Levenbrook, 'Abortion': In T. Regan, 'Matters of Life and Death', (London: McGraw Hill, 1992).

J. F. Finamore, '*Iamblichus and the theory of the vehicle of the soul*', (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1985).

G. G. Gallup, 'Chimpanzees: Self recognition', *Science*, 167: 86-87.

D. H. Garrison, '*A cultural history of the human body in antiquity. Volume 1*', (London: Bloomsbury, 2010).

P. Godfrey-Smith, 'Other minds: The octopus and the evolution of intelligent life', (London: Williams Collins, 2021).

H. P. Grice, 'Personal identity', *Mind*, 50(200), 330-350, 1941.

R. Hardcastle, 'Law and the human body. Property rights, ownership and control', (London: Hart Publishing, 2009).

A. Kind, 'Persons and Personal Identity', (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).

S. Lawler, 'Identity: sociological perspectives', (London: Polity Press, 2013).

D. Leder, '*The absent body*', (London, University of Chicago Press, 1990).

G. E. R. Lloyd, 'Early Greek science: Thales to Aristotle', (London: Chatto & Windus, 1970).

J. Locke, 'An essay concerning human understanding', (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975).

T. M. Luhrmann, 'When God talks back. Understanding the American evangelical relationship with God'. (New York: Vintage Books, 2012).

N. Marsh, D. Scheele, D. Postin, M. Onken, & R. Hurlemann, 'Eye-tracking reveals a role of oxytocin in attention allocation towards familiar faces', *Frontiers in Endocrinology*, <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fendo.2021.629760/full>. Last accessed 23/12/2022.

J. Perry, 'A dialogue on personal identity and immortality', (Indiana: Hackett Publishing Press, 1978).

J. Perry, 'Personal identity', (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

A. Quinton, 'The soul', *The Journal of Philosophy*, 59(15), 393-409, 1962.

T. Reid, 'Of Reid', In: J. Perry, 'Personal identity', (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

A. O. Rorty, 'The identities of persons', (London: University of California Press, 1976).

O. Sacks, 'The man who mistook his wife for a hat', (Oxford: Picador, 2022).

A. Sauchelli, 'Derek Parfit's reasons and persons', (London: Routledge, 2020).

B. Shanon, 'The antipodes of the mind: Charting the phenomenology of the ayahuasca experience', (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

S. Shoemaker, 'Self-knowledge and self identity' *Journal of Philosophy*, Sept 7, 1972.

P. Smith, & O. R. Jones. '*The philosophy of mind. An introduction*', (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1997).

P. F. Strawson, 'Individuals: An essay in descriptive metaphysics', (London: Routledge, 1959).

E. Thompson, '*Mind in Life. Biology, phenomenology, and the sciences of mind*', (London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2010).

J. J. Thomson, 'People and their bodies', In: J. Dancy, Reading Parfit, (London: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

J. Webster, K. Tanner, & I. Torrance, 'The Oxford handbook of systematic theology', (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

L. Wittgenstein, 'Philosophical Investigations', (London: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009).