

2: The immaterial soul

A traditional view holds that the real person is the 'soul': a non-material entity that is 'lodged in' the body but is quite distinct from it. It is an unchanging core to a person. Being a simple thing, it is, by its nature, immortal.

A possible problem for this view arises from the question: what grounds could we have, given this view, for any of our judgements about who anyone is? How could we tell that this body contains the same soul as it did yesterday? It might be thought that at least I can know this in my own case. But that is not clear.

Another problem may arise from the question: what conditions must be satisfied if it is to be true that a particular soul is the *same* soul as some earlier one? If we take seriously the idea that a soul is a non-material thing with no position in space we will see that this question does stand in need of an answer (since an answer in terms of spatial-temporal continuity is not possible), and that it is not clear what answer there could be.

'.... because, on the one hand, I have a clear and distinct idea of myself, in as far as I am only a thinking and unextended thing, and as, on the other hand, I possess a distinct idea of body, in as far as it is only an extended and unthinking thing, it is certain that I (that is, my mind, by which I am when I am) am entirely and truly distinct from my body, and may exist without it.' (Rene Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641), pp 132-3)

'So that it must, in fine, be maintained, all things being maturely and carefully considered, that this proposition I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time it is expressed by me, or conceived in my mind.' (Descartes, *Meditations on the First Philosophy* (1641), p 86)

'I thence concluded that I was a substance whose whole essence or nature consists only in thinking, and which, that it may exist, has need of no place...' (Descartes, *Discourse on Method* (1637), p. 27).

'A part of a person is a manifest absurdity. When a man loses his estate, his health, his strength, he is still the same person, and has lost nothing of his personality. If he has a leg or an arm cut off, he is the same person he was before. The amputated member is no part of his person, otherwise it would have a right to part of his estate, and be liable for a part of his engagements. It would be entitled to a share of his merit and demerit, which is manifestly absurd. A person is something indivisible ... My thoughts, and actions, and feelings, change every moment; they have no continued, but a successive existence; but that self or I, to which they belong, is permanent, and has the same relation to all the succeeding thoughts, actions and feelings which I call mine.' (Thomas Reid (1710-96), *Essays on the Intellectual Powers of Man*, p 202)

'It is as if I were to say: "You surely know what 'It is 5 o'clock here' means; so you also know what 'It's 5 o'clock on the sun' means. It means simply that it is just the same time there as it is here when it is 5 o'clock." – The explanation by means of *identity* does not work here. For I know well enough that one can call 5 o'clock here and 5 o'clock there "the same time", but what I do not know is in what cases one is to speak of its being the

same time here and there.’ (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), *350)

Some questions:

- (i) Pick out the premises and the conclusion of Descartes’ argument in the first passage. Express these in your own words. Is the argument valid?
- (ii) Can Descartes know, or have grounds for believing, that each time he says ‘I am’ he is speaking of the same person? (See second quote.)
- (iii) Summarise in your own words Reid’s argument for the claim that: ‘A person is something indivisible’. Is it a good argument?

3: Personal identity and memory

John Locke (1632-1704) objected to the ‘simple soul’ view that even if I imagine that Plato’s soul inhabits my body I could not think of myself as Plato unless I had inside memories of his life. He concluded that what is crucial to being the same person as some earlier individual is having a memory – ‘consciousness’ – of his life. This approach fits with ways we may be inclined to think of reports of reincarnation.

One objection to this view comes from the fact that it implies that if I don’t remember doing something then I am not the person who did it. That conclusion may seem unacceptable when we consider various practical contexts: for example, ones involving punishment, shame, and personal relations. The disagreement with Locke here is not so much a disagreement about ‘the facts’ – a disagreement about what kinds of thing exists - as about the significance that should be attached to certain facts.

A second objection to Locke’s view is that it leads to a contradiction: the case in which the captain remembers stealing apples as a boy, the general remembers being the captain, but the general doesn’t remember stealing the apples.

‘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 actions? attribute them to himself, or think them his own, more than the actions of any other man that ever existed?’ [Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book Two, ch xxvii, section 14]

Some questions:

- (i) Does Locke, in the first of the above passages, offer good grounds for the claim that it is not ‘having the same soul’ that is crucial to ‘being the same person’?
- (ii) What is the difficulty for his own view that Locke raises in the second passage? Does he offer a satisfactory reply to the difficulty?

