

Theories of Personal Identity

Part I

What criteria or conditions do we employ to identify persons as one and the same over a period of time?

The persistence question: ‘What does it take for a person to persist from one time to another?’

The example of the Ship of Theseus illuminates puzzles about the persistence of objects over time.

Psychological Continuity Approach

Our identity through time consist in some psychological relation. The memory criterion of identity – endorsed by Locke – is an example of this approach.

Imagine the following scenario – your brain is removed and implanted into my head. Would you be the being with the implanted brain, or would you be the empty-headed being left behind? Many people would say that you would go along with your brain if it were transplanted, and they would think this probably because your brain carries with it your memories and other mental characteristics.

Physical Continuity Approach

Our identity through time consists in some physical relation. Whether you survive or persist has nothing to do with psychological facts. This view implies that in the case above,

where your brain is transplanted into my head, you stay behind in your body.

Anticriterialism

This view denies that there is some criterion for identity.

Part II

Parfit on Personal Identity

- The fission case: suppose that you could divide your brain, and that each half is transplanted into a new body. Both resulting people have your character and memories of your life.
- What happens to you?
 - Are you (1) destroyed?
 - (2) one of the two people?
 - (3) both of the two people?
- (1) seems wrong. Most people would say that you could survive if your brain were successfully transplanted. ‘And people have in fact survived with half their brains destroyed. It seems to follow that I could survive if half my brain were successfully transplanted and the other half were destroyed. But if this is so, how could I *not* survive if the other half were also successfully transplanted? How could a double success be a failure’ (Parfit [1971], 2004, p.561).
- (2) is arbitrary.

- For Parfit, (3) is our best option. But now there are two different beings that are the same person as one past being, and identity seems to be a one-one relation.
- How do we overcome this problem? For Parfit, identity (as a one-one relation) is not what matters in terms of survival. The relations that matter are those to do with psychological continuity. He suggests we use the language of personal identity to imply such continuity. 'This', he says, 'is close to the view that psychological continuity provides a criterion of identity' (ibid., p.566).
- Parfit's view is that what matters in survival (of me) need not be one-one. What matters is not identity but psychological continuity (and we could be psychologically continuous with one or more future persons). This is a better way to think of our survival through time. In the case of fission, 'We can suggest that I survive as two different people, without implying that I am these people' (ibid., p. 564). '[T]he relation of the original person to each of the resulting people contains all that interests us - all that matters - in any ordinary case of survival' (ibid., p. 565).
- Parfit thinks that psychological connections are what's important. Such connections can be a matter of degree.

Teleportation

Simple teletransportation: a person is destroyed in one location, but all the relevant information about her is recorded via a scanner and transmitted to a new location on Mars where an exact replica of her is created.

If you could travel by teleportation, would the created replica be you?

The branch-line case: the same process as above occurs, but the scanner has a problem and creates both a person on Mars and retains the person on Earth. The person on Earth is fatally harmed and faces death. The replica on Mars offers to pick up where the earthling's life left off (Parfit, 1986, pp. 199-201).

‘If we believe that my Replica is not me, it is natural to assume that my prospect, on the Branch Line, is almost as bad as... death’. Parfit denies this assumption, claiming that ‘I ought to regard having a Replica as being about as good as ordinary survival’ (ibid., p.210).

Do you agree?

References

Parfit, *Reasons and Persons* (Oxford: OUP, 1984), Part 3.

Parfit, 'Personal Identity' [1971], in *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology*, edited by Crane and Farkas (OUP, 2004).

Reading for students

Essential reading

Parfit, 'Personal Identity'.

Further reading

Crane and Farkas, *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology* (OUP, 2004), pp.527-536.

Roderick M. Chisholm, 'Identity through Time' (a selection from 'Identity through Time' from *Person and Object*, Open Court Publishing, 1976), in *Metaphysics: a guide and anthology*, 2004, *ibid*.

Hamlyn, *Metaphysics* (CUP, 1984), ch.9.

Parfit, 'Liberation from the Self' (extracts from *Reasons and Persons*, 1984, sections 95-96), in *Western Philosophy: an anthology*, edited by Cottingham, second end. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008).