

Personal Identity

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1. Introduction

2. Issue 1: what kinds of change can happen to one and the same person?

I.e. is it possible for a person to exist throughout a period of time, during which they undergo such-and-such changes?

- The destruction of one's body, followed by the transplanting of one's brain into another body
- The destruction of one's brain
- The destruction of everything except for one's fingernail
- The destruction of one's body and brain, followed by the 'transplanting' of one's memories and personality into a specially prepared blank brain
- Death and gradual putrefaction
- Death and reincarnation, or resurrection in disembodied form
- Total amnesia
- Total amnesia together with total personality change
- Teletransportation
- Fission and fusion

A closely related question: there are certain events which it's uncontroversially possible to survive, but still controversial what properties people have before and afterwards.

Williams' case: swapping memories and personality between two brains.

3. A warning about the use of the word 'identity'

4. Is it OK to rely on a *priori* intuitions to resolve these questions?

5. Issue 2: the connections between personal identity and other notions

We normally assume

- If you find out that something bad or good is going to happen to *someone else*, it makes sense to feel angry or disappointed or glad... but only if it's going to happen to *you* does it make sense to feel *fear* or *dread* or *anticipation*.
- If you have a choice such that if you do A, in the future you are going to be rich, happy, healthy, and if you do B, in the future you are going to be in great pain, then you have *prudential reason* to do A and avoid B.
- A person can only be *directly morally responsible* for actions done by *that person*. People can justly be punished for their own actions, but not for those done by other people.

Principles like these play an important role in the usual approach to resolving difficult questions about personal identity

Parfit argues that they are not true in all cases

6. Issue 3: vagueness and indeterminacy in personal identity

Some yes-no questions have no right answers, because of vagueness. It is indeterminate whether P.

It seems that questions about persistence through time can be like this. EG: does a table continue to exist when all of its legs are cut off?

The best way to make sense of how this could happen: there are two sorts of material objects, tables₁ and tables₂. Tables₁ do survive the loss of all their legs; tables₂ don't. Wherever there's an ordinary table (with legs), there is both a table₁ and a table₂. Our word 'table' is indeterminate in meaning between 'table₁' and 'table₂'; we haven't decided how to talk.

If questions about persistence can be indeterminate, it seems very natural to think that questions about the persistence of *people* can also be indeterminate. You can construct a series of cases, each very similar to the next, starting with a case in which it is clear that the person survives, and ending with one in which it is clear that the person does not survive. It seems implausible to think there will be a sharp cutoff between the two sorts of cases.

Williams suggests that it doesn't make sense to hold that it is indeterminate whether a person will survive some change. *Parfit* thinks that does make sense, and that it has radical consequences for how we should think of ourselves.

7. A very familiar class of arguments about personal identity

My body will cease to exist when I enter the teletransporter
My body now occupies the same place as me
No two things occupy the same place at the same time
Therefore, I will cease to exist when I enter the teletransporter

My body will continue to exist after my cerebrum has died
My body now occupies the same place as me
No two things occupy the same place at the same time
Therefore, I will continue to exist after my cerebrum has died

And so on. To get different results, plug in 'the aggregate of atoms which currently occupies the same place as me', or 'the aggregate of cells which currently occupies the same place as me', or 'the animal which currently occupies the same place as me', and vary premise 1 to fit.