

OUTLINE **Personal Identity**

This course will span **four** lectures. In it, we will look at the main positions in the debate on the persistence of persons. In the first lecture we will begin by disambiguating a number of different problems that are each variously referred to as ‘the problem of personal identity’. We will then go on to look at Locke, Williams, Parfit, Shoemaker, and Olson.

- 1. What is the Problem of Personal Identity?**
- 2. Locke on Sortals and Psychological Continuity**
- 3. Elaborations on Psychological Continuity**
- 4. Animalism**

Lecture 1

What is the Problem of Personal Identity?

1. Introduction

Before we can begin to examine any of the readings on the reading list, we need to first clarify the question that is at issue. We'll begin today, then, by identifying a series of different, but closely related, questions that concern persons and personhood. Only when we understand these can we truly understand what any given position in the metaphysics of persons amounts to.

To help us to disambiguate the various problems of personal identity, I will draw on Olson's (2002) "Personal Identity". I highly recommend reading this when you revise this topic (if, of course, you haven't already read it).

2. Problems Concerning Persons

Olson very helpfully distinguishes between an array of questions that different philosophers take to be related to the metaphysics of persons.

Outside of philosophy, questions about our *identity* tend to concern those features of us that we take to be important to who we are (especially in social contexts). So, for instance, my identities include: being a woman, being a person of colour, being queer, being Canadian.

But, in this context, the word 'identity' is often taken to pertain to the conditions under which some *X* is identical to some *Y*. In this case, the conditions under which person *X* is identical to person *Y*. (**NB:** It is worth noting here that the kind of identity at play here is **numerical identity**, as distinct from **qualitative identity**. The former, and not the latter, obeys Leibniz's Law.)

Here, then, are various questions that have, at times, come under the heading of questions on "personal identity".

Persistence

What does it take for a person to continue exist over a period of time? This is the question most often addressed under the heading "personal identity". If you like, the question concerns the conditions under which *X-at-time- t_1* and *Y-at-time- t_2* are *the same person*. These are often referred to as **persistence conditions**.

What is puzzling about persistence? Well, consider **Leibniz's Law**:

$x = y$ iff, for all properties P , Px iff Py .

On the face of it, it looks as though this is inconsistent with anything changing over time. You might worry that, for any objects, times and properties, if X -at-time- t_1 has property P and Y -at-time- t_2 does not, then X cannot be identical to Y .

What is more, even if you think objects can persist through change, there remains a puzzle about *how much* a thing can change and still be numerically identical to the pre-change thing. Consider, the **Ship of Theseus**. Suppose a ship is made up of the following parts: Hull (H), Mast (M), and Sail (S). We think the ship can survive replacing any one of these parts. So, for instance:

$(H+M+S)$ is the *same ship* as (H^*+M+S)

But what if each of the parts was replaced one at a time? Consider:

$(H+M+S) = (H^*+M+S)$
 $(H^*+M+S) = (H^*+M^*+S)$
 $(H^*+M^*+S) = (H^*+M^*+S^*)$
 $\therefore (H+M+S) = (H^*+M^*+S^*)$

Now, as we can see the question of persistence over time doesn't just arise with respect to persons. So why treat the questions separately? Well, you might think that there is something about **personhood** that may yield a different answer to the question 'When does X persist through change?' than, say, when we're asking about a ship. Compare:

"Through which changes does the lump of clay persist?"

v.

"Through which changes does the statue persist?"

But if the **kind of thing** X is affects X 's persistence conditions, then we need to determine what kind of thing X is! Since we know we are interested in persons, this leads us to the question: What is it to be a person?

Personhood

To ask "what is it to be a person?" can be understood as to ask for the necessary and sufficient conditions of personhood. It is to ask what it takes to be a person, and what together is enough to be a person. Olson notes that some take all other questions about persons to reduce to these ones (2002: 353), but argues that this is mistaken.

To see why, consider that we often want to know of *X* and *Y* **where both are persons** whether they are the *same* person (see the last section). But in this case, knowing *that* *X* and *Y* each satisfy the necessary and sufficient conditions for being a person will not supply an answer. Of course, that is not to say that the conditions of personhood do not bear on other questions about personal identity at all. After all, for any *X* and *Y*, I can at least know that a **necessary condition** for their being the **same person** is that they both *be* persons!

These questions concerning what it takes to be a person are closely related to those concerning what kind of thing a person is.

What are we?

This question concerns the kind of metaphysical entity that we are. You might wonder whether we are material or not. Or whether we are animals or not. Or indeed whether we exist or not. These sorts of questions have bearing on the previous one insofar as if you think we are persons, and you also think we are (say) material, then it looks like the necessary and sufficient conditions for personhood must allow that at least some persons are material. Once again, it is not the case that either one of these questions reduces to the other. Nevertheless, answers to one will impact on how we can answer the others.

Population

When we ask after the size of a population, we want to know *how many* *Xs* there are. This will be related to the matter of numerical identity in that, in order to know how many *Xs* there are, I need to know what it takes to be **one X**. For instance, if I wanted to know how many objects there are in the room, then I would need to know whether I should count the legs of the tables as *separate* objects or as part of *one* object (namely the table). This involves saying when *X* is the same object as *Y*, and also when *X* is a proper part of *Y*.

Notice too that asking this question is related to, but distinct from, the question “How can I *tell* whether to count some *X* and some *Y* as one?” (This is what Olson calls a question about **evidence**. It is an epistemological question about the metaphysical matter at issue.)

In this set of lectures, we’ll look primarily at the **persistence** question. As you can now see, the matter of persistence will be *related* to some of these other questions about the nature of persons and personhood. But it is not the same questions as these others.

Tip: When doing the readings, constantly ask yourself, “To which question is this point/argument/thought experiment relevant?”

3. The Persistence of Persons

We think that it is the case that we can persist over time. Indeed, this belief is of great importance to us for a number of different reasons.

We hold people **responsible** for actions that they performed at some earlier time because we think that they are (in some relevant sense) the same person as the one who performed the action in question.

We **plan** for our futures and evaluate the **rationality** of actions because we think that the person that will face the consequences of those plans and actions is the same person as we are when we make the plans or decide to perform an action.

If it turned out that we did not persist over time, then it seems that we should regard our future selves in the same way that we regard distinct persons that exist synchronically with (at the same time as) us.

Our answer to the question of persistence may suggest an answer to questions about the possibility of our survival after the death or destruction of our bodies.

Notice that this is not a question about how we *would* feel under different conditions; but rather about a metaphysical fact about persons that our feelings may or may not track. Nevertheless, **hypothetical thought experiments** abound in this debate. We are invited to consider various (and variously realistic) scenarios in which we undergo different kinds of changes. It is often then suggested that we should draw certain metaphysical conclusions from the intuitions that these scenarios elicit. Why should we do this if our feelings may not track the metaphysical facts? The idea here is that these intuitions provide **defeasible evidence** for an answer to the persistence question. It is either the case that the intuition is correct, and it tells us something about the persistence of persons. Or it is the case that it is incorrect, in which case whatever account of persistence we give, it needs to be compatible with an explanation for why we harbour this incorrect intuition. (At least where intuitions are largely uniform. Intuitions often disagree; in those cases, the datum to be explained is the existence of disagreement.)