

Lecture 2

Psychological Continuity and Objections, Part II

1. Introduction

Last week, we saw that while the psychological continuity account had initial plausibility, it faced a number of problem cases. What is more, it wasn't clear that the account would be able to accommodate all of those cases without giving up on one or another desiderata for personal identity. Let's begin by trying to enumerate those desiderata.

- (a) **Intrinsicness** (i.e. identity should be a relation that is intrinsic to its relata)
- (b) **Transitivity** (i.e. for all a, b, c, if a=b, and b=c, then a=c)
- (c) **Determinateness** (i.e. it is necessarily false that sometimes there is no answer as to whether X is identical to Y)
- (d) Preserve our **intuitions** about our **survival**
- (e) Preserve our **intuitions** about our ability to **change**
- (f) Maintain personal identity as an instance of **numerical identity**
- (g) Preserve our **intuition** that there are **roughly as many persons as bodies**

So, to briefly review the problems and solutions we considered:

- The naïve **memory condition** violated (b) and (d)
- The psychological continuity condition faced a challenge from **fission** cases
- **Fission** threatened (b) and (f)
- Adding **non-branching** to the account violated (a)
- **Multiple-occupancy** violated (g)
- The view that we are **spacetime person-worms** may violate (e)
- The view that personal identity **admits of degrees** violates (c)

2. Parfit on Survival and What Matters

Parfit begins with the fission case and considers the three obvious answers to the question of identity in this case.

- (1) You do not survive fission.
- (2) You survive as one of Lefty or Righty.
- (3) You survive as both.

Now, supposing that survival implies identity, each of these seems implausible for different reasons.

- (1) is implausible because, if only one of the two transplants were to have taken place, then you *would have* survived. This solution fails **intrinsicness**.
- (2) is implausible because there does not seem to be a non-ad hoc way of determining which of the two *you* are. This solution fails **determinateness**.
- (3) is implausible because, it either follows that Lefty and Righty are the same person or they are not. Saying they are the same person would be “intolerable” (1971: 7) since they would otherwise (intuitively) have all the attributes of a person. But if they are not the same person, then fission results in *three* persons (Lefty, Righty, and You (who is both Lefty and Righty)); in this case, a number of highly unintuitive results follow (cf. duel case in 1971: 8n8).

Parfit argues that the problems here arise from taking identity and survival to come together. Instead, we should say that “I survive as two different people without [that] implying that I am these people” (8).

He first considers the objection that this response doesn’t address the problem we were interested in in the first place—namely, the problem of *identity* that arises from the fission case. In response to this, Parfit argues that this objection only holds up if you accept (i) that there is a true answer to any question about personal identity (i.e. what we have called **determinateness**), and (ii) that important questions turn on the question about identity (i.e. that identity *matters* to other issues).

In support of rejecting determinateness, Parfit offers examples of other identity questions that seem not to have clear answers. For instance, “Was England the same nation after 1066?” (8). Another example comes from Parfit (1984):

*Suppose that a certain club exists for several years, holding regular meetings. The meetings then cease. Some years later, some of the members of this club form a club with the same name, and the same rules. We ask: 'Have these people reconvened the very **same** club? Or have they merely started up **another** club, which is exactly similar?' There might be an answer to this question. The original club might have had a rule explaining how, after such a period of non-existence, it could be reconvened. Or it might have had a rule preventing this. But suppose that there is no such rule, and no legal facts, supporting either answer to our question. And suppose that the people involved, if they asked our question, would not give it an answer. There would then be no answer to our question. The claim 'This is the same club' would be **neither true nor false**. (213, original emphasis)*

The question 'is X the same person as Y', Parfit maintains, is the same as the question 'is this the same club' from the example above in the sense that they are both **empty**. In the case of the club, there is nothing over and above the activities of particular individuals such that, if we knew it, we would have a determinate answer to the identity question. Similarly, in the case of persons, once we agree on all of the physical and psychological connections that hold between some X and Y, there is no contentful further question about whether X and Y are the same person.

If I knew the facts about both physical continuity and psychological connectedness, I would know everything there was to know. I would know everything, even though I did not know whether I was about to die, or would go on living for many years. (1984: 214)

Parfit also rejects (ii)—that personal identity matters to other issues. Consider the fission case again. Only this time, suppose I'm thinking about the possibilities of having one hemisphere transplanted or having both hemispheres transplanted. It seems to make sense that I would regard the transplant of one hemisphere as something that I could survive, that would regard the person who will wake from the procedure as the same person as I am. So what of the double-transplant? If indeed nothing identical with me wakes from the surgery, then—some argue—I should regard fission as death. But Parfit argues that this would be "wildly inconsistent" with my feelings about a single transplant. As he puts it "the 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" (1971: 10).

Parfit argues that though we seem to consider personal identity as what matters, the real reason for this is that, in most cases, personal identity coincides with that which really matters—namely, psychological continuity. The fission case helps illustrate this. In the fission case, precisely the same psychological continuities exist between the original and Lefty and Right as exist between the original and the patient that wakes after a single-transplant procedure. But if this is the case, then there are no good grounds for saying that survival occurs in the fission case, but not in the single-transplant case. There are, however, good reasons to say that identity doesn't obtain in the fission case (e.g. the logic of identity).

Nevertheless, Parfit continues, we can still give a definition of personal identity in terms of psychological continuity. Since identity must be a one-to-one relation, we can include that in the definition by fiat. Hence: X is the same person as Y iff "*they are psychologically continuous and there is no person who is contemporary with either and psychologically continuous with the other*" (1971: 13).

3. Van Inwagen on Materialism and Psychological Continuity

Van Inwagen argues that a psychological continuity account is inconsistent with materialism. More precisely, he argues that it is not possible to accept (1) materialism and (2) the possibility of “bodily transfer” cases (like fission cases); and also that the reason this is true of (2) extend to psychological continuity accounts as a whole.

He considers a version of bodily transfer on which informational brain-states (rather than hemispheres of brains) are transferred from one body to another, though nothing in the argument hangs on understanding the transfer as ‘digital’ rather than physical. Supposing that such transfers are possible, imagine your brain-state is transferred into some new human organism HO at a time after t_1 . In this case, a materialist must believe the following combination of claims:

- (a) You are identical with HO
- (b) At t_1 HO was at some place p
- (c) It is not the case that, at t_1 you were at p (by hypothesis)

By Leibniz’s Law, it follows that you were and were not at p at t_1 . But perhaps there are ways to avoid this contradiction.

You might **deny (a)** and claim that while you occupy the same space as HO, it is not the case that you are *identical* with HO. But this seems to violate materialism, for on materialism, argues van Inwagen, “if one believes that persons really exist, then one must concede that every person is strictly identical with *some* material thing” (1997: 312, original emphasis). Of course, you could accept materialism and the denial of (a), but it follows from the conjunction of these two claims that there are two distinct material human organisms that could become identical to one another because your brain-state information has been transferred from one to the other. And this results in another contradiction.

Perhaps, then, we should say that *identity is always relative to a sortal term*. In this case, it would be possible for X and Y to constitute two different organisms and yet be the same person. However, van Inwagen rejects this strategy because relativising identity in this way “has very radical logical and semantical consequences, and one might wonder whether any position in the philosophy of mind should be allowed to dictate [these]” (313).

Another option is to accept **four-dimensionalism**—i.e. the position that “the things we normally regard as enduring through time are extended in time as well as in space” (313). However, against this, van Inwagen argues that there is reason to think that the temporal dimension is not like the spatial one in this way. He also claims (though does

not here argue) that this view commits one to a counterpart theory analysis of modal statements about individuals.

Van Inwagen draws the intermediate conclusion that the materialist should either deny that persons persist over time, or else (and this is the better option) they should deny that this kind of transfer is possible.

If this is so, though, what implications does it have for materialism and psychological continuity? We can imagine a version of psychological continuity that is inconsistent with the possibility of bodily transfer; for instance, such a view might hold that “psychological continuity is possible only within a single material object” (315). Van Inwagen acknowledges this possibility, though notes that it would seem to be rather against the spirit of the psychological continuity view insofar as it would imply that such continuity could only hold within a single body. (Q. Perhaps the matter of ‘digital’ versus physical brain transfer is relevant here?)

Van Inwagen also considers that the conjunction of materialism and psychological continuity would entail that the following is possible:

x is a material object that exists at one time and y is a material object that exists at another time and whether x and y are identical is entirely a function of whether certain psychological states that are "tokened" in or realized in x are continuously connected with certain psychological states that are tokened in y. (316)

He argues that, if human persons are material, this would be akin to saying that whether two computers are identical is entirely a function of whether “the information processing that is going on in [one] computer at one time is causally continuous with the information processing that is going on inside the [other] computer at the other time” (316). The latter is implausible, he argues, and as such, so too is the former (on materialism).

Why not say that human persons are identical with human brains? This is either to reject the psychological continuity account or it is not. If it is, then van Inwagen’s point is made—psychological continuity must give way to materialism. If it is not then, to preserve materialism, we must be able to say that psychological continuity only holds if the relevant psychological states exist in the same brain; but in this case, we need a way of identifying brains over time independent of psychological continuity. And in this case, the account of personal identity would not be strictly psychological.