

PERSONAL IDENTITY LECTURE 1

1. The philosophical issue of personal identity involves two questions: (i) what is it for something to be a person? And (ii) what is it for persons to survive? There are four reasons why these questions have been of interest: practical ethics, responsibility, eschatology and your attitude towards your own life.
2. We can start by considering the concept of identity and looking at identity-questions for non-persons. First distinguish *numerical* from *qualitative* identity. No two objects are numerically identical. Numerical identity obeys Leibniz's Law (indiscernibility of identicals): if $a=b$, then *any* property of either is a property of both. We are concerned with *numerical* identity.
3. The general problem is about when some object considered at one time is the same as some object at a later time. For example we might say that the oak tree in 2000 is the same tree as the sapling in 1900. This seems to violate Leibniz's Law: for the oak tree has the property of being more than 10' tall whereas the sapling doesn't. However there is no real violation of the law: they both have the property of being less than 10' tall in 1900 as well as the property of being more than 10' tall in 2000.
4. For inert physical objects, e.g. molecules, it seems that we equate identity over time with identity of material constitution: [I]f two or more Atoms be joined together into the same Mass... the Mass, consisting of the same Atoms, must be the same Mass, or the same Body, let the parts be never so differently jumbled: But if one of these atoms be taken away, or one new one added, it is no longer the same Mass, or the same Body" (Locke *Essay* II.xxvii.3).
5. Now it is evident that in "organic" cases like the oak tree identity of material constitution is neither necessary nor sufficient for identity itself. Not necessary: the atoms in any living thing are constantly being replaced by other atoms; by 2000 it is likely that the oak tree contains *none* of the atoms that were present in the sapling, and yet it is still the same living thing (II.xxvii.3-4). Not sufficient: those very atoms that composed the sapling might all have migrated into, so that by 2000 they wholly compose, some *other* sapling. It seems that instead, the right way to judge of organic identity is by looking at the spatio-temporal *continuity* of the object together with its organization. The oak tree is the same living thing as the sapling because it is spatiotemporally continuous with it and functions in an appropriately related way.
6. Can we apply the criterion to persons? If so, then whether A is the same person as B depends on whether A and B are (or occupy) the same living body. Suppose all A's psychological traits are transferred to the brain of B, and vice versa. If personal identity were a matter of mere animal identity then we ought to say that A has had a personality transplant; but the

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- natural description is that A has had a *body* transplant. And this has consequences. It would be B's body that you punish for the crimes of A. The same thinking applies to multiple personalities. Finally, think of it from your own perspective: you can surely imagine having somebody else's body. But if it is *you* that you are imagining having that body then your persistence cannot simply be a matter of the organic persistence of your body (II.xxvii.15).
7. There are essentially two ways of developing this thought. First: you might identify yourself with, and your survival with the persistence of, a Cartesian ego or soul or "self": a featureless bearer or owner of psychological episodes. The idea of such a self *seems* to be completely natural; actually there is some evidence that it was a Christian invention that was made explicit by St Augustine. (See Mauss's essay "The Category of the Person" in a collection with that title ed. Carrithers, Collins and Lukes.) Alternatively you might regard personal identity as a matter of more or less enduring or suitably connected psychological *traits* without committing yourself to some underlying unity that connects them all by being their bearer or owner.
 8. On the first picture, personal identity consists in no sort of resemblance or psychological relation. It is simply the persistence of the seat of one's consciousness. The plausibility of this doctrine is that it is just about the only one around that respects a *very* deep-seated intuition that there is a non-arbitrary dividing line between those parts of the future in which I survive and those in which I am dead. An answer is available 'from inside' whether such and such change will result in my death: it is not a matter of arbitrary stipulation. Locke himself observes that this subjective self-awareness is what distinguishes *personal* identity (II.xxvii.9). The intuition is compatible with the Cartesian view; as we'll see it doesn't seem compatible with any other.
 9. But imagine two cases (II.xxvii.13). In the first a single ego survives a variety of psychological vicissitudes. In the second case there is a *succession* of egos, each one passing on to its successor all the memories and psychological traits that it has at the end of its life. Now nothing either from the third person *or the first person* point of view shows which of these obtains. The point is that if we identify survival with ego-persistence then the concept loses its point.
 10. Even more obviously, Hume points out that not only are we aware of the persistence of an ego, we are not even aware of its existence (*Treatise* I.iv.6). All one ever comes across in experience is particular mental states; one never observes a constant bearer of all of them. Why think it exists?